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THE
OLD MAIDEN'S TALISMAN
AND OTHER
STRANGE TALES.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"CHARTLEY;" "THE INVISIBLE GENTLEMAN;"
AND "THE GENTLEMAN IN BLACK."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE
OLD MAIDEN'S TALISMAN.

VOL. I.

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THE OLD MAIDEN'S TALISMAN.

CHAP. I.

LADY MARY DENINGFORD was the merriest of merry old maids. We call her an old maid, without stopping to inquire at what period of life unmarried ladies ought to be entitled to that name, because it was her ladyship's own good will and pleasure so to style herself. For several years before the time at which our tale begins, she had declared herself to be on the wrong side of thirty, and wished

it to be understood that her resolution was fixed, and that nothing could induce her to relinquish a state of single blessedness; as her rank prevented her from changing the address on her cards, (as from "Miss" to "Mrs.") she took frequent opportunities of expressing this her determination, lest, as she laughingly said, "any gentleman should indulge in vain hopes, and reap the bitter harvest of love that meets with no return."

But no one attempted to dissuade Lady Mary from the course which she had resolved to pursue, though she went much into society, and was a general favourite wherever she went; all liked her, and all spoke well of her, perhaps because she was never known to speak unkindly of any one. People felt themselves *safe* with her—and that, though a quiet and unassuming recommendation, is so generally appreciated in society, and, moreover, so easily

to be acquired, that one cannot help wondering sometimes how it is that so few endeavour to obtain it for themselves.

In person, Lady Mary was a trifle below the middle height, and her figure exceedingly good, though somewhat inclined to "embonpoint." In her younger days, report describes her as having been remarkably beautiful, and it was not difficult to credit this report; for, of an evening, when one sate at a short distance from her, the kind, good-humoured expression and vivacity of her countenance were such as seldom to be equalled by any present. How was it, then, that her ladyship had remained single during the course of her earlier years? It is a question which we cannot positively answer, though rather inclined to think that the circumstance of her being of noble birth, with an annuity of only four hundred a-year, is not altogether irrelevant

to the matter. Moreover, that was not only all she had, but all she expected; and expectations always go for something, when mothers, and fathers, and spinsters, and bachelors, are in the deliberative mood.

But Lady Mary was quite contented. She had, long since, so established herself and arranged her expenses, that her income was perfectly adequate to them; and thus she knew nothing of those embarrassments and disagreeable surprises which Christmas bills often present to the owners of ample fortunes.

She had spent the earlier part of the winter at Bath, and was thinking of going from thence to London, when, one morning, as she sate alone at breakfast, she was informed that an elderly gentleman wished to speak with her on particular business. As the stranger entered, there was something so deferential, and almost reverential, in his mode of addressing her, so

totally different to anything that she had, latterly, experienced, as to excite in her the most lively curiosity concerning who he was, and what could be the nature of his important business. He was a tall, spare, upright figure, clad in a new suit of black, which contrasted admirably with the silvery grey of his scattered locks. He might be about seventy; but the freshness of his complexion and the firmness of his step indicated a degree of vigour seldom retained till that age. As he took a seat, at Lady Mary's invitation, a benignant smile, and a certain sparkling of the eye, proclaimed that he was not the herald of ill tidings; but, a moment after, he checked himself, and assuming a serious, respectful manner, said, "Your ladyship does not recollect me?"

"Not exactly," she replied, "and yet—and yet—it seems like a dream—I feel that we are not strangers."

“No, my lady, we are not,” replied the venerable man. “But it is nearly thirty years since we have met — and then you were *very* young. Can you recall to mind a person of the name of Merington?”

“Oh, yes, yes!” exclaimed Lady Mary, “and *you* are Mr. Merington? My poor dear uncle George’s friend! Oh! it seems but yesterday! Tell me, have you heard of him lately? I do long to hear! My late brother told me that he had been unfortunate, and never liked to hear his name mentioned, though I believe he received from him one or two letters.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Merington, “he corresponded for some time with the late Lord Draxfort—but——”

“Pray, my dear sir,” exclaimed her ladyship, “tell me where he is. Is he still unfortunate? Is there anything that I can do? My means are small, but I have many friends, and

I never have asked a favour of any, as yet. Remember, I was his favourite niece, and I loved him dearly, and often — often have I wished we might meet again.”

Instead of replying, Mr. Merington leant his elbow on the table, and placed his hand before his eyes, as if to conceal his emotion ; but Lady Mary perceived still the same benignant smile about his mouth, and therefore continued playfully, “ And I used to be a favourite of yours too, recollect. Indeed I don’t take it quite kind of you not to have brought me tidings of my dear uncle before. If I had known where to find you, I should have called upon *you* long since.”

“ Thank God ! all is as it should be ! ” exclaimed Mr. Merington, casting his eyes for a moment upward ; and then, as though overpowered by his feelings, he threw himself back in his chair.

“ You terrify me !” cried Lady Mary.

“ God bless you ! God bless you !” said the old man, taking her hand, and pressing it fervently. “ You have made me happy ! To find you what you are, is the only compensation—but—but—” and, dropping her hand, he resumed his former respectful manner, as he continued, “ I forget myself, my lady. I have, indeed, strange and important intelligence to communicate to you, and must entreat you to summon all your fortitude.”

“ Speak, Sir, I am all attention,” said Lady Mary.

“ My friend — I may justly call him so — your uncle — is — is — no more,” gasped the venerable old man.

Lady Mary sate for a few seconds motionless, and then, rising from her chair, resumed, “ Excuse me — I must — I must leave you for a few minutes.”

Mr. Merington handed her to the door, and, as she passed out, added, "He died happy, and your name was the last he uttered."

Nearly half an hour had elapsed ere she again made her appearance. It was evident that she had been weeping; but a sweet smile overspread her countenance, as she advanced toward her aged friend, and, seating herself by his side, she said,

"He died happy, you tell me. Let me know all; I can bear it *now*. And he remembered me, too, you say? You are the bearer of some little token, I trust; a lock of his hair, or somewhat that he was in the habit of using, I hope. I know he was not rich; but, be it ever so insignificant in other people's eyes, it will be inestimable in mine, for the dear donor's sake."

"Yes, Mary," replied Mr. Merington,—“I

beg your pardon,—Yes, my lady, he *has* remembered you.”

“ Call me Mary again,” said her ladyship. “ That familiar word, and the sound of your voice, reminds me vividly of the days when he and you used to play with me, in my childhood.”

“ My friend was an eccentric character,” resumed Mr. Merington. “ Perhaps he might not have thought himself justly used, in having so small a property allotted to him, as a younger son, though he scorned to complain : but latterly he took the liberty of remonstrating, by letter, with your brother, the late Lord Draxfort, on the very inadequate annuity paid to your ladyship.”

“ I hope he did not think me discontented ?” said Lady Mary ; “ I’m certain no one ever heard me complain.”

“ Such an idea never entered his mind,”

continued Mr. Merington ; “ he estimated your character too correctly to fall into such an error. But, to proceed — your late brother, Lord Draxfort, did not feel disposed to listen to his representations, and, I fear, returned such an answer as to wound the sensitive feelings of my friend : but he was a man not easily to be turned aside from a purpose which he had once undertaken, and after the death of his nephew he wrote on the same subject to his son, the present lord.”

“ It was kindly intended,” observed Lady Mary, “ and I shall respect his memory the more on that account ; but, really, had I known of this before, I am afraid that I have not sufficient humility to have endured being thus made, as it were, a suppliant — a sort of beggar.”

“ Banish all fears on that head,” resumed Mr. Merington. “ Your uncle George, on each

occasion, distinctly stated that he had held no communication with you, either on that subject or any other ; and I have good reasons for believing that he avoided writing to your ladyship solely because you should not be exposed to mean suspicion."

"How considerate !" exclaimed Lady Mary. "Alas ! it is grievous to think that such a heart should have been exposed to misfortunes !"

"My friend had his trials," continued Mr. Merington, "and they were severe and enduring ; but latterly, I am happy to tell you, fortune smiled upon him, insomuch that when his last application on your behalf to Lord Draxfort failed, he was able to make arrangements by which your ladyship's annuity would have been increased to a thousand a-year. I perceive your emotion, my lady ; but do not interrupt me. I have much more to tell you, and

must again request that you will summon all your fortitude to hear me to the end."

"I see it plainly," ejaculated Lady Mary. "My dear uncle died before the necessary documents were completed, and what he intended for me falls into the family property. I am content, and resigned."

"Not so, my good lady," said the kind-hearted old man; "what my friend intended for you during his life is your own — and more — *much* more."

"How!" exclaimed her ladyship. "My *poor* uncle! as they called him always — how can this be?"

"It has been observed," said Mr. Merington, "that we should never call a man fortunate or unfortunate till after his death. Your uncle did not die poor. Fortune seems in his latter days to have delighted in making compensation for what she had formerly caused

him to suffer. He has left behind him considerable property, and, with the exception of a few legacies, has named your ladyship the heiress of all that he possessed."

Lady Mary passed her hand across her forehead, as though bewildered. Till that moment she had conducted herself, in the presence of her aged friend, most heroically. Death was the common lot; disappointment she could endure; privations she had long been accustomed to; but an elevation to fortune was what she had never seriously contemplated, and when it came upon her thus suddenly, it was too much, she sobbed hysterically, and burst into a flood of tears.

When her agitation had somewhat subsided, Mr. Merington proceeded, guardedly and gradually, to speak of the amount of the property. The few hundreds a year and "much more," the mention of which had so affected the heir-

ess, formed but a very small portion of her inheritance. It appeared that her late uncle (who commenced his career in India at an age when others frequently return) had contracted a warm friendship with one of the native princes, who, in a series of those feudal contests which it is not our province to narrate, was despoiled of his hereditary possessions, and reduced to a state of poverty. As Mr. Denningford had, during the struggle, advanced for him the whole of his property, it perished in the general wreck; and thus he found himself thrown entirely upon his own personal resources at a period when he had just flattered himself with the idea of having surmounted that first formidable barrier, which excludes the poor and friendless from entering the lists to compete with those who are most fortunate.

Many years passed in ineffectual endeavours to repair the consequences of this one act of

indiscreet, romantic generosity. It would be wrong to say that the means which he pursued, or the line of conduct which he adopted, were always such as prudence would have dictated to a calculating man. Every one acknowledged his abilities; many were loud in their encomiums on his disinterested friendship; and those who called themselves his friends affirmed they had no doubt that, in the course of time, he would receive some advantageous appointment. None, however, exerted themselves in his behalf, and he was too proud to dance attendance and to flatter those who had it in their power to assist him. The natural consequences were, that as years rolled by, and the persons in office with whom he was acquainted returned to England, he became less and less known and thought of; and, at length, he was considered as the doomed son of disappointment—a child of misfortune. Then, like

others who have drunk long and deep draughts from the bitter cup of adversity, if he became not a misanthrope at heart, he shunned society and loved to dwell alone. This was deemed eccentricity; but it separated him from his fellow men so effectually, that if any were inclined to render him service, it would have been necessary to force themselves upon him, a task not likely to be undertaken by those whose levees were thronged by petitioners.

Thus nearly twenty years had elapsed. He was dwelling, with an humble appointment, at a small town in the interior, when intelligence arrived of an insurrection in favour of his former friend. On that subject he had long abandoned all hope, as several movements had been already excited, and had been almost as instantly quelled; on the present occasion, however, things took a different turn. The people demanded the restoration of their expatriated

Rajah, the British were induced to interfere, and in the course of a few months the prince was re-established in his dominions. When he learnt that Mr. Deningford, contrary to the custom of his countrymen, still remained in India, his joy was excessive, and he immediately solicited and obtained for him the lucrative appointment of resident at his own court. The friendship of earlier day was thus renewed, and, in spite of all remonstrances, he insisted on cancelling the long standing debt with interest and compound interest.

It was at that period, when his fortunes had so suddenly changed, that Mr. Deningford addressed a letter to his nephew, Lord Draxfort, on the subject of Lady Mary's annuity; not because, in reality, he felt deeply interested in the matter, but, in order to discover the character of the person who would inherit his increasing riches. His lordship, who was as ignorant

of Indian affairs as any country gentleman, remembered only to have heard of his uncle as being a poor man, in some inferior situation abroad. He therefore, unfortunately for himself, felt indignant that such a person should presume to interfere in the arrangement of his family affairs, and wrote a very laconic reply. By the influence of their evil genius, or Lady Mary's guardian angel, his son and heir, who shortly afterwards succeeded him, happened to be present while his father was thus engaged, and his lordship told him of the impertinence of which a *poor distant* relation had been guilty, adding, "The fellow has been in India long enough to have made half-a-dozen fortunes, but I understand he joined some rebel prince, and has hardly a rag to his back. We never speak of him, of course: but it is fit that you should know there is such a person, that you may be on your guard

against an adventurer,—a fellow living upon his wits.”

The young nobleman remembered this misrepresentation but too well ; and, some years afterwards, when he received a similar letter, he answered it in a style which he judged would put a stop to all further correspondence :—and, truly it had that effect.

In the mean while, and indeed ever since the favourable change in his circumstances, Mr. Deningford seems to have given up his whole mind to the accumulation of riches, not, certainly, for the sake of present enjoyment, for no man in his situation could have lived more frugally. Some imagine that it was his intention to have returned home, and, by a display of his wealth, mortified those who had offended him ; be that as it may, his long experience in the country, the various advantages of his situation, the purse of his grateful friend

always open to assist his speculation, and all the talents he possessed, were brought into play for the purpose of effecting the one great object. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that success crowned his exertions : but no one guessed the real extent of his fortune, as he systematically contrived to keep himself in the back-ground in all transactions of magnitude. Enough, however, was known to convince persons on the spot that he was getting rich; and a whisper of it once reached the table of the young Lord Draxfort, who observed, that he believed there was a distant relative of the family in India, of whom the less that was said the better, and so the conversation was dropped.

The only person with whom Mr. George Deningford had kept up an uninterrupted correspondence, was his friend Mr. Merington, whom he commissioned to ascertain the pre-

sent character of their former favourite, Lady Mary : but as that gentleman had, long since, retired from the gay world, to devote himself to the practice of the law, the commission was transferred to an individual acquainted with all parties, and of whom we shall have occasion to speak hereafter. The sequel of all inquiries was most gratifying to the busy accumulator ; and soon after he received it he made the arrangement for increasing his niece's income, and was preparing to return to England himself, when death suddenly put an end to his future plans, whatever they might have been.

From this digression, if such it can be called, we return to the small parlour, where Lady Mary and her aged friend were sitting. He informed her of the various particulars in her uncle's history, and gave her to understand, at first, that the fortune bequeathed to her was ample—then, that it was what the world called large.

“ It is impossible, my lady,” said he, “ at present to calculate the exact amount : but you may form some notion, when I tell you that my friend has left me a legacy of ten thousand pounds.”

“ The worthy man !” exclaimed her ladyship. “ It could not have been better bestowed.”

“ I own to you, frankly,” said Mr. Merington, “ that, but for this unexpected addition to my small means, I could not have flattered myself with the hope of that quiet retirement which advancing years render almost necessary : but I shall receive it with still greater pleasure because the sum, large as it is, is one which, under present circumstances, your ladyship will scarcely miss.”

As she sat down to breakfast that morning, Lady Mary had received a note from a widow lady, declining her proposal of sharing the expenses of a chaise and pair be-

tween them to London, and had consequently, just come to the decision that it would be most prudent to travel by the "two-day, two-horse" stage, commonly called "The invalid's coach."

Having stated thus much, we shall leave the reader to imagine her feelings when, ere the conference was ended, she was given to understand that her fortune, entirely under her own control, amounted, *at least*, to two hundred thousand pounds.

The only request she made to Mr. Merington was, that he would keep the whole affair a profound secret for some days; and to this he assented, observing at the same time, that such an occurrence was one very difficult to conceal. In this observation he was perfectly correct, as the clerk he had brought from town with him was at that moment divulging it in confidence to an old acquaintance, who immediately re-

solved to avail himself of the communication for his own advantage.

There had been a time when Lady Mary, under such circumstances, would have instantly made the round of her acquaintance, to proclaim the joyful intelligence to her dear five hundred friends; but now, when she found herself alone, she endeavoured to reflect and to trace out some plan for the future. All her previous uniform and tranquil arrangements were, of course, disconcerted. She was called upon to lead a new sort of life, and to practise other duties, as those of frugality and economy would henceforth be useless.

Regret that her uncle had not lived to return home and enjoy the harvest of his toils, formed no inconsiderable part of her reverie; and she pictured to herself how happy she should have been to have watched over his comforts, in the decline of life, and to have proved herself in

some degree worthy of his good opinion. But she would have been more or less than a human being if such a sudden change of destiny had not excited other and more directly personal reflections; some of these were too painful to be dwelt upon. There were certain periods and scenes in her past life, which she was conscious would have led to a very different result but for the want of fortune; and, when the remembrance came over her, she sighed. Then, startled at her weakness and apparent ingratitude, she endeavoured to turn the course of her thoughts to the future; and among other fancies of what the world would say and how differently certain persons would conduct themselves towards her, she smiled at the idea that perhaps, *now*, some tender-hearted swain might endeavour to persuade her to change her resolution of leading a single life.

CHAPTER II.

AMONG the number of those who contrive to mingle with society and to keep up a genteel appearance with limited means, there was at Bath a Major Wilburton. Lady Mary had been in the habit of meeting him, for several seasons, both there and in London, and as he was an inveterate whist-player, and she occasionally enjoyed a rubber, they had sometimes sat at the same table. The major was a fine, portly-looking man, about fifty, and had he obtained his brevet rank some years earlier, would probably have carried his point with

some rich waning spinster or wealthy widow. But, though he had no mean opinion of himself, he reflected that the time had arrived for him to make a bold dash somewhere, and never was fortune-hunter more eager on the look-out than he was at the time of which we write. For this eagerness there were more reasons than the grey hairs which he contrived to disguise every morning;—he was afflicted with those common pests of fortune-hunters called debts, and some of the claims upon him began to be pressed in a manner which occasionally irritated him, and sometimes made him feel serious and uneasy.

On the morning when Lady Mary received Mr. Merington's visit, but about two hours later, the major was likewise sitting at breakfast, when a professional man made his sudden and rather unwelcome appearance. This person was a Mr. Wirstall, an attorney, a little,

dapper, smiling individual, who always appeared in a bustle, and to be full of business. It is not worth while to say more of his character than that he did not stand very high in his profession, and that his duties were confined almost entirely to those processes in which the celebrated John Doe and Richard Roe figure so conspicuously. It was to those inseparable friends that he had owed his first introduction to the major, whose acquaintance he afterwards cultivated with that avidity so frequently to be observed in persons of doubtful pretensions towards any one who is generally received in good society.

Now Major Wilburton was a calculating personage, and, so far from discouraging his little friend, flattered his vanity by the most gracious condescension, with the intent of making him useful; and the use he put him to was that of obtaining certain advances of money

from certain of his clients, by representations which, whether true or false, it is not our business to inquire into. For these sums the major's bills were regularly given, though not often regularly paid; but then they bore interest, and so the lenders had hitherto been kept tolerably quiet by Mr. Wirstall's repeated assurances concerning his friend's responsibility and respectability. But the most amiable of creditors sometimes become weary of procrastination, and one of the bill-holders bluntly told the little lawyer that if he did not "proceed" immediately, the affair should be transferred into the hands of some one who would. To make this threat known to the major was one of the objects of the present visit; but another, of far more importance, was behind, to be revealed or not, according to circumstances; and what that was is easily explained by saying, that the person to whom Mr. Merington's

clerk had confidentially revealed Lady Mary Deningford's secret was no other than Mr. Wirstall.

“ Good morning, my dear sir,” said the major, scarcely able to conceal his vexation ; “ pray take a seat. Have you breakfasted ? ”

The lawyer replied in the affirmative, and then, after a few common-place questions and answers, by way of prelude to business, he proceeded to speak of the aforesaid flint-hearted bill-holder, expressing his regret and disappointment at such obstinacy, and expatiating on the difficulty of raising money on any terms, in a style of tautological verbosity too wearisome for detail.

“ Curse the pig-headed ass ! ” exclaimed the major, pushing away his cup and saucer ; “ why can't he be content to wait like the rest ? People shouldn't pretend to lend money if they can't afford to lie out of it for a little

while. Why, it was but the other day that he advanced it !”

“ Last winter, major,” observed Mr. Wir-stall, “ when it was understood that you were on the point of marrying the widow Wind-fall.”

“ Pish !” said the major ; “ what should such a fellow know about those matters ? Can’t you give him to understand that something of the sort is going forward now ? Come, that ’s a good fellow—you understand how to manage with them ; and besides I ’ve a lady in my eye—I have, ’pon my honour.”

“ I am sorry for it, major,” observed the lawyer, smiling.

“ Why so, my dear friend ?” exclaimed the desperate fortune-hunter, eagerly ; “ Do *you* know of anything new ? anything fresh come to town ? Come, tell me, that ’s a good fellow.”

“ I certainly do know of something,” replied the lawyer, with an air of mysterious importance. “ But then, if you’re engaged—and besides you’ll hardly believe, from the appearance of things, that there is so large a fortune; but I *know* it—I have it from the fountain-head, from the lawyer who has the will in his possession.”

“ I see it ! I see it at once !” cried the major : “ some one out of society, or we must have heard of her. No matter—how much ?”

“ More than two hundred thousand—all in her own possession and at her own disposal.”

“ A divinity !” exclaimed the major. “ What—who is she ? a citizen’s widow, I suppose.”

“ No—she is a single lady,” answered Mr. Wirstall, “ and, to tell you another secret, I am assured that there is not any one paying his addresses to her.”

“ Then she must be confoundedly ugly !”

observed Major Wilburton—"a downright Gorgon! But no matter, if she were the pig-faced lady herself, with *such* a sum!—Are you sure you are right, Wirstall?"

"Rather more than less," said the lawyer; "and as for ugliness, that's all fancy, you know; but I have seen her, and, before I knew she had any fortune, thought her really handsome."

"Zounds! Wirstall, my dear fellow," exclaimed the major, "you'll drive me mad! Where is she? what's her age?—no matter for that, though; the older the better.—I *must* see her!"

What followed between these two despicable beings was too mean, paltry, and disgusting, to give at full length; suffice it to say, that the lawyer would not reveal his secret till he had exacted from his friend a written promise of a large pecuniary recompense, in case of success.

He then told all he knew, adding, that Lady Mary herself would not be in possession of the secret till the following day, as Mr. Merington had told his clerk that in the first interview he should confine himself to the event of her uncle's death, and the circumstance of his having left sufficient property to increase her income. Such, indeed, had been the considerate old gentleman's first intention, but he was induced to swerve from it by what he observed in Lady Mary's character.

The major's toilet on that day was of course an affair of more than usual importance ; but he contrived to have it completed before the usual hour of calling, and at two o'clock presented himself, with a beating heart, at the door of the house in which his "intended" lodged.

Lady Mary was just thinking of giving orders to say that she was indisposed, and

could not receive any one who might happen to call; but it was too late, the major had been admitted, had manfully ascended the stairs, and was already at the door of her little parlour.

“It is very provoking,” thought she, “to be intruded upon by any one on such a day; but *that* man of all others—what can he want?” From this it may be inferred that the aspiring major was no particular favourite with her ladyship. Indeed, she had never liked him; but certain *brusque* observations in which he had permitted himself to indulge on her mode of play, the last time she sat with him at the whist-table, made her resolve never to expose herself to anything of a similar kind again. So she determined that thenceforth he should not be her partner at whist; and of any other sort of partnership, it is almost unnecessary to say, she had not the most distant idea.

After the usual every-day salutations, and observations concerning the weather, the major commenced his attack by alluding to this very scene, and continued, “ Your ladyship must have thought me very rude, and I confess I was so. You will, however, perhaps, be more surprised when I tell you that it was *not* from forgetfulness, but *purposely*—nay, do not look so cruelly incredulous, I entreat! I had heard so much of the sweetness of your ladyship’s disposition—indeed, I had seen so much of it, that—perhaps I was wrong, but where one feels so *deeply* interested one sometimes errs beyond the bounds of just discretion—I was determined to put it to the proof; and I shall never forget with what heavenly mildness you endured the trial, nor the easy, elegant *non-chalance* and generosity with which you so adroitly turned the conversation when all eyes were fixed upon us. Indeed, Lady Mary,

your noble conduct *then*, if I had never *before* looked upon you with admiration, would have left an impression never to be effaced."

"What *can* the man mean by all this?" thought her ladyship.

"I trust, Lady Mary," said the Major, putting on one of his most killing smiles, "I trust you will pardon me for this innocent ruse, when you consider the motive. I know I was to blame—that I must have appeared rude; but, if you could read my heart, you would find nothing there but the most profound respect—I had almost said veneration, for your character and virtues, which I have *long* held in a degree of admiration, which it is utterly out of my power to express."

Here we beg permission to observe, that, though our tongues are very active little members, and often rattle away prodigious nonsense at a prodigious rate, they can in no

wise keep pace with the rapidity of thought ; consequently, while the major had been “blazing away” with his heavy, sesquipedalian-verbal artillery, her ladyship had visited every outpost, and each commanding elevation, and thereby discerned both the plan and the cause of this unexpected and furious attack upon the citadel of her heart.

“Yes,” said she to herself, “he must have heard of the change in my fortune. I remember that he was always notorious for obtaining the first intelligence on such subjects. I will hear him out, however.”

Perhaps there was a little of the spirit of retaliation, a little spite, a little curiosity, and a little feminine vanity, in this resolution, but the principal actuating cause was, that innate propensity to merriment, which never seemed entirely to forsake Lady Mary under any circumstances. It is true that she had been

weeping a few hours before, at the news of her uncle's death ; but we are describing the *movements* of her mind, and not her outward conduct and appearance. If any one should charge her with a want of feeling for admitting ideas bordering on drollery on such a day, we will ask such a person, how often he has wept *internally*, and *without ceasing*, for several hours, at the death of an individual whom he has not seen or communicated with for nearly thirty years ? The human mind is, providentially and mercifully, so constituted that it seldom has the power or the misery of long confining itself intently and *solely* to *one* particular thought. The greater number of our fancies and ideas come upon us unbidden, either awakened by the influence of surrounding objects, or born of the mysterious broodings of the spirit which dwelleth within us, and whose nature we cannot comprehend.

Let not Lady Mary Deningford, then, be deemed unnatural for the admission of a playful whim at such a time, considering how many, even forbidden thoughts, will intrude upon us poor mortals when resolved, wholly and entirely, to dedicate our minds to the performance of important duties.

Pardon this brief digression, gentle reader. We return to our task of story-telling.

“ You will forgive me, Lady Mary ?” said the Major.

“ It was not worth mentioning again,” she replied. “ You are not the only gentleman whom I have known to be a little brusque under the influence of ill luck ; and really, I believe I played shockingly.”

“ Oh ! not at all, my lady !” exclaimed the enamoured swain ; “ the fault was entirely mine. Your ladyship plays a most excellent game. I have *often*,” (here again he strove to

recall his best looks,) “*very* often stood behind your chair, when you were not aware of it, and remarked the exceedingly judicious mode in which you have played.”

“But you know I forgot where the thirteenth trump was, and led up to ——”

“Pardon me !” cried the Major ; “ I don’t *precisely* recollect the *exact* state of the game ; but I am *sure* I played so as to mislead you, and to make you suppose I held the trump. I remember *that* perfectly, because it was part of my plan. And you do, really, forgive me ?”

As he uttered the last words he offered his hand.

“ Yes,” said Lady Mary, extending her’s as a pledge, “ I have no notion of harbouring ill-will toward any one, and I trust that henceforth we shall be as good friends *as before*.”

There was a certain emphatic tone in the

conclusion of this speech, not quite to the wooer's mind, yet he resolved to proceed, as such an opportunity would, probably, never again occur to him, and their *tête-à-tête* was liable, every moment, to be put an end to by some other visiter. He therefore grasped and pressed the proffered hand with well-dissembled ecstasy, and ere the owner was aware of his intentions, had stooped and brought it in contact with his lips. Her ladyship was astonished, for, though she had made up her mind to undergo a wooing, she had not an idea that the explosion would be so sudden.

“ Sir!—Major!—Major Wilburton!” she exclaimed, endeavouring vainly to withdraw her hand, now clasped between both his; “ I beg, sir, you will ——”

Ere she could utter another word, the gallant major was on his knees, breathing forth incoherent rhapsodies, at the sound of which

her momentary wrath was dispelled, either by curiosity or merriment, for she resolved to hear him out.

“ Rise, sir ! I entreat of you !” she exclaimed. “ Consider, if any one should enter the room, how exceedingly ridiculous such a scene would appear in persons of *our* age !”

“ Then say you will listen to me ! noblest, most amiable of women !” ejaculated the prostrate suitor.

“ Not another word in that position,” said Lady Mary, firmly. “ Let go my hand, which you are really hurting, and take your seat, or I will pull the bell.”

“ Then you will hear me ?” cried the major.

“ Yes,” replied Lady Mary ; and she could say no more, from the absolute necessity of biting her lips.

“ When he had resumed his seat he continued : “ Your ladyship is all kindness — all

goodness ! and I—I have again to implore your pardon for my abruptness. But, oh ! Lady Mary ! the sentiments which I have long cherished towards you, the feelings which I have long and vainly endeavoured to smother within my own breast—I cannot describe them !”

“ Well, at least,” thought Lady Mary, “ he will surely make some attempt ;” and, with the assistance of a smelling-bottle and pocket-handkerchief, she endeavoured to maintain the gravity becoming a lady under such circumstances.

“ I cannot describe,” resumed the major—
“ it is impossible to describe the struggles which I have undergone, and the alternations between hope and fear which I have suffered for the last few long years ; but I resolved that my secret should remain buried in my own breast, and even die with me, unless some favourable change in my prospects should place

me in a situation to declare what I feel towards the *only* living being on whose account I deem life valuable. The period, I am rejoiced to say, is at length arrived. Prudence, which your ladyship will well understand when I tell you that I have *hitherto* been obliged to exist upon my half-pay,—prudence has, *alone*, kept me silent ; but now, I am certain of promotion. The last time I was in town I had little doubt on the subject, from the very flattering manner in which his Royal Highness the Commander-in-chief was pleased to notice me, and yesterday I received a letter — but I will not weary your ladyship by entering into a detail of military affairs. The sum of the matter is, that hereafter I shall enjoy an income, certainly not adequate to what I should wish to throw at your ladyship's feet, but amply sufficient to support that moderate establishment which I am convinced, from long observation

of your ladyship's character, will command all the conveniences and elegances which are necessary for your comfort."

For a moment, Lady Mary had some difficulty in restraining her indignation, for she well knew that he had no chance of either promotion or appointment, being considered as permanently shelved on the half-pay list. She, however, soon returned to her former resolution of hearing him out, as one who could invent such barefaced falsities appeared to her a fair object of ridicule. When he ceased speaking, both were silent for the space of a minute, during which she sat with her eyes fixed upon the fire, "getting up," and preparing for the part she had resolved to act. Encouraged by this symptom, the major ventured to draw his chair somewhat closer, and said—

"Your ladyship, then, will permit me to hope?"

“It is best,” observed Lady Mary, in a cold, business-like manner, which must have appalled any suitor who wished to win her *heart alone* — “It is best, sir, to be explicit on such occasions. *You* know the amount of *my* annuity ; it is four hundred a year. *We* have both *long* since passed the years of dreams about love in a cottage ; so permit me to ask, what may be the amount of the appointment you allude to ?”

This was so much like consent, according to the axiom that “the woman who deliberates is lost,” that the major now was really enraptured. With the quickness at expedients, which he had learnt from long practice in the art of raising the ways and means, he foresaw that the fame of his being about to marry two hundred thousand pounds, would easily enable him to borrow an odd thousand or two, to pay into the hands of an army agent. So, without

the least hesitation or scruple, he affirmed, that the money was all ready, the treaty for a lieutenant-colonelcy nearly concluded, and his appointment to a situation in the quarter-master-general's department, all but made out.

“ I have been very particular in my calculations, Lady Mary,” he continued, “ as I feel how serious a thing it would be, hereafter, to be suspected of misrepresentation ; and I find that, after deducting interest of money, which I shall have to pay for a few years, there will remain, *clear*, from a thousand to twelve hundred a-year.”

“ Really !” exclaimed her ladyship ; “ you are very fortunate, major.”

“ If your ladyship consents to share my rising fortunes,” said the lover, “ I shall, indeed, be the happiest of men ; but if, alas ! I should be disappointed in that long-looked-for and fondest of my hopes !—But, no ! I will not

imagine so fearful a destiny. Your ladyship is all kindness—all goodness ! You have listened to me with patience, and I will not despair. But, my dear Lady Mary !”—Here he drew his chair still closer, and united in his voice and manner all that he deemed most insinuating —“ My dear Lady Mary ! you have, with true nobleness of character, referred to our time of life, and justly observed that we have passed the days of dreaming of love in a cottage ; allow me, then, to add, that we have likewise passed the days of long and tedious probationary courtship. We have known each other for years ; we are both entirely free to act as we please ; therefore, loveliest and most amiable of women ! let me intreat of you to throw aside those idle forms and ridiculous prejudices which are the refuge of cold, unfeeling, and calculating hearts. Let the natural dignity and frankness of your own character

appear, and let me believe that my ardent declaration, and the constant, fervent attachment, cherished for years, is not unappreciated?— You do not reply. It is needless; that eloquent silence proclaims my future happiness! Oh, noblest of thy sex! ——”

Here he gave vent to a string of those hyperbolical terms which most ladies have, on sundry occasions, been doomed to hear. Her ladyship now felt that it was time to put an end to the farce, and therefore, as soon as he was silent, either from want of breath or the lack of a few more angelic epithets, she assumed her usual easy, playful manner, and spoke as follows:—

“Certainly, Major Wilburton, I ought to feel myself very highly flattered, and grateful, and so forth; but how in the world could it enter into your head, I don’t say your heart, because, at *our* age, you know, all that sort of

thing is gone by,—but how *could* it have come into your *head* to make love to *me*, when you know my resolution? No! My will is free, my heart's my own, and, to tell you the truth, notwithstanding your display of eloquence, I don't apprehend that there is any great danger that either of us will die for love at *our* age. However, should you really come to such a tragical end, your exit cannot be imputed to me, as you have often, for several years past, heard me give fair warning to all who ventured to treat me with the smallest particular attention."

"Your raillery is charming, though cruel, Lady Mary," sighed the poor major; "but I cannot believe that you will always persevere in a resolution so unnatural, and, allow me to say, so unjust to society and to yourself,—*you*, who were born to shine at the head of a family!"

“ Pray, major, do you happen to know Mr. Merington ?” inquired Lady Mary, abruptly.

“ No,” replied the astonished wooer ; and this time he spoke the truth, as he had been too much occupied with the thoughts of his great adventure, to attend to the name when mentioned by his friend Wirstall. “ No, my lady. I don’t remember ever to have heard — But, surely — surely your ladyship cannot be engaged !” he exclaimed, as the fearful idea rushed upon him.

At this critical moment, that which he had long dreaded occurred. The door of the little parlour was thrown open, and one of the most inveterate gossips in Bath entered the room. At first he determined to sit her out, but when the accustomed limits of a morning call had more than expired, her ladyship, using the privilege of plain speaking, which was generally accorded to her, requested her female

visiter to remain, as she wished to ask her advice on a particular subject.

The major again pressed her hand on taking leave, and learnt his doom, by her ladyship observing, "I can do nothing more for the person you were speaking of, major; but I hope he may be more fortunate elsewhere."

Notwithstanding this, the persevering suitor called again, in the latter part of the day, but her ladyship was "not at home."

She was sitting in her chamber, and when she thought of this first consequence of her wealth, she trembled at the prospect before her.

CHAPTER III.

RACHEL BOND was a thin, active, wiry, shrill-voiced little body, about fifty odd, and had been Lady Mary's own maid for some five-and-twenty years. Her attachment to her mistress was excessive, and the interest she took in all her concerns proportionate with it. Great, therefore, was her surprise when her ladyship made known her intention of going to London in a post chariot, hired for the occasion, and furnished with a dickey behind for old William, a grey-headed invalid, who usually attended upon her while at Bath, as she

kept no regular footman. Rachel expostulated against this useless expense, with her long-accustomed zeal and freedom of speech, but her ladyship, instead of giving way, as she had frequently done before, only smiled and replied,

“It must be so, Rachel. I have very particular reasons for not travelling by the coach this time; so let me have my own way for once, that’s a good soul, and don’t say any more about it.”

“Particular reasons!” thought Rachel, when alone; “what can they be, I wonder?”—and she began to take a survey of all that had latterly passed in their quiet lodgings. “Certainly,” said she, “my lady has not been like herself for the two last days, ever since that old, strange gentleman in mourning came and stayed so long with her—And then, there was that Major Wilbram, or whatever they call him, came and stayed a long while too the

same morning. Surely, surely, she a'n't going to throw herself away at this time o'day, on such an old figure as that? *She*, that might have done so well so long ago, and is a match for any duke in the land, be he who he may!"

Here she was interrupted by the entrance of old William, who came to assist in the not very formidable task of packing up; and shortly after, they were both surprised by a thundering knocking and loud ringing at the door, while a carriage stopped at the same instant.

"Her ladyship is indisposed," said William, as he performed the functions of porter. Many expressions of concern issued from the interior of the splendid vehicle, and several cards were handed out.

"Humph!" thought the old man, as he ascended the stairs on his return; "I came just in time! — 'The Countess of B——,'

‘ Lady Caroline C——,’ ‘ Lady Georgiana C——,’ ‘ General R——.’ I don’t remember their ever calling before. Heard my lady was going, I suppose. That ’s the way with some folks. Here, Mrs. Bond,” he continued, entering the kitchen, “ here ’s some cards that some of them as I waits upon would be glad enough to have to stick up over the mantelpiece. Halloo ! What ! another knocking and ringing ! ‘ It never rains but it pours,’ I think.”

This adage was seldom more fitly applied, for during the whole of that morning William could find time to do little else than receive cards and answer inquiries. Poor Rachel Bond was more bewildered than ever, for as she carried in the cards successively, her lady calmly desired that they might be laid on the table, and went on reading a book, in which she appeared much interested ; so there was no opening for remark or conversation, by which

the mind of the wondering handmaiden might be enlightened concerning what was going forward.

It now appeared clear to Lady Mary that her secret was known to the world, and most probably formed the topic of general conversation. Accordingly, she hastened the few necessary preparations for her departure early on the following morning, and resolved, at the hour of retiring to rest, to reveal the change in her circumstances to her faithful attendant, whose natural garrulity she had no longer any cause to dread.

On hearing the strange news, the poor creature sat down, and cried, and wrung her hands for joy, even as though some great calamity had fallen upon her; it seemed to her like the realization of a fairy tale. "You deserve it all, my lady," she sobbed, "you do—you do. I knew something of the sort would

happen some day, I did ; I have often said so to myself."

" You are a good soul, Bond," observed her ladyship, smiling ; " but how was it that you never said so to me ? there have been times when a belief in such a prophecy would have cheered me much." Here a sigh escaped her involuntarily. " But we must endeavour to be as happy as we can, Bond," she continued ; " so you must think what I can do for you."

" My lady !" exclaimed Rachel, starting up as if she had been electrified, " my lady, surely—surely you don't mean to send *me* away ? I'm sure you'll never get anybody——" But her emotion was too great to allow her to proceed, even in her own praise.

" No, no, Bond, I had no such idea," said her ladyship, kindly ; " that is, unless it should be your wish ; we have lived too long together to part without some substantial reason. I

know you are attached to me ; but sometimes, you know, single persons have attachments of a stronger nature than those they feel towards a mistress, and if there should be anything of that kind——”

“ Bless your dear heart !” cried Rachel. “ Well, you will have your jokes, my lady, and I’m glad of it ; I hope you’ll always be so, though money doesn’t always make people merry, I know that. There’s poor Lady Highfield, who brought his lordship such a large fortune, does nothing but cry when she’s alone.”

Lady Mary made no reply to this remark, but there was something in it which dwelt upon her mind, and kept her long awake.

On the following morning she left Bath, and arrived about five in the afternoon at Speen Hill, where she determined on spending the night. Old William, to whom Rachel had

revealed the real state of affairs, bustled about with immense self-importance, and waited upon her ladyship during dinner in a style of ludicrous gravity and dignity. About half an hour after the termination of that important ceremony, he again entered the room, bearing a card upon a silver waiter.

“A card *here!*” exclaimed Lady Mary.

“Yes, my lady,” replied William: “the gentleman as it belongs to came in about an hour after us, in his own carriage with post-horses, and before he would get out inquired particularly if your ladyship wasn’t here; and, besides that, I find he’s been making the same inquiry all the way along as he came from Bath. He desired me to say, that if your ladyship was not engaged very particularly he should be happy to wait upon you, as he has something very particular to say to you, my lady.”

The card bore the name of "Mr. Yerraway," an old and wealthy East Indian, and one of the very few people in the world against whom her ladyship felt a decided antipathy. The cause of this was not any rudeness which she had herself received at his hands; on the contrary, he had always, and more especially latterly, treated her with a degree of marked respect and attention seldom evinced by him to any one else; but she had witnessed, with feelings approaching to indignation, his contemptuous and insolent demeanour towards others, and more particularly towards a nephew, who was supposed to be dependent upon him. This, she argued, indicated a bad heart, and she consequently avoided him as much as possible, while it often appeared evident to her that he watched for opportunities of throwing himself in her way. With such sentiments towards the card-sender, she was about to de-

cline receiving his visit, under the plea of fatigue, when a whimsical idea struck her.— Could it be possible that the septuagenarian invalid wished to make proposals to her? She was alone, without amusement, and the evening would be wearisome and long; so she decided that such a farce might serve to beguile the time, and gave old William instructions accordingly.

When the old gentleman made his appearance, he certainly did not present a good figure for the part of a lover; thin, even to meagreness, with his head projected forward, as though too great a burden for his frail body to support, he advanced with tottering step towards her ladyship, and held out his shrivelled hand, saying, “This is very kind of you, my lady; I have followed you all the way from Bath, and was sadly afraid I should not have overtaken you to-night.”

When he was seated, Lady Mary felt sorry that she had admitted him. She had never before so minutely examined his features and the expression of his countenance, in which she now read discontent, ill-humour, and misanthropy. Evil passions seemed to her to be written in the deep lines of his long, narrow face, the sallow hue of which was visible even by candlelight, and his small eyes were half-hidden by grey brows, beetling with an habitual scowl. She was, it is true, prejudiced against her visiter, but it is equally true that he was far from handsome.

“ I wished much for an interview with you, my lady, before you went to town,” said he; and then he paused, while his little eyes twinkled and his mouth spread itself into a smile, which made him appear to her ladyship absolutely horrid. “ You are wondering,” he continued, “ I dare say, what I can wish to

speaking to you about. So, as you will no doubt have plenty of people to talk to you on one subject, I'll set your mind at ease on that head—I am not come to make love to you; besides, if I was, I see plainly enough that I'm not the man. I know I am no great favourite of yours, my good lady, and I like you the better because you have been at no pains to disguise your opinions; we shall, however, understand each other better ere we part. You are prejudiced against me on account of my behaviour to my nephew and one or two more who are, I verily believe, in the habit of praying for my death every night, that they may enjoy what I leave behind; but they shall find themselves mistaken."

The last words appeared to Lady Mary to be vented with diabolical malignity; but, as she seldom allowed an opportunity of serving an injured person to pass unimproved, she ven-

tured to observe that such conclusions were not exactly in the spirit of Christian charity, and that she believed the world judged very differently of his nephew and relations.

“The world!” rejoined the old gentleman, sarcastically; “what should the world know of the matter? I *know* that they are all anxious for my death, but more particularly that young smirking coxcomb, who is always in my way, for ever pestering me with inquiries after my health and his insufferable, impertinent attentions: he would fain make me believe that he is solicitous about my welfare, when nothing would rejoice him half so much as to hear that I had broken my neck or fallen down in an apoplectic fit. It was but the other day that I urged him to return to London, and resume his studies in the law, to which he was bred; but he told me that he could not bear the idea of leaving me till my

health was completely re-established, while his real motive for tormenting me with his presence is, the mean and sordid fear lest some one else should occupy his place and deprive him of the golden harvest. He has neither respect, esteem, nor affection towards me, though he is eternally counterfeiting them all. This is a painful truth, Lady Mary; but I *know* it to be a truth, and with that knowledge can you wonder that I feel unable always to conceal my disgust at his affectation of solicitude about me when in public, where he is constantly watching and dodging me, for fear I should pick up some new acquaintance who might become a favourite with me to his detriment? Your ladyship is one among the number of those on whom he has cast a jealous eye. Ridiculous as the idea was, he tormented himself with the notion that I was about to make you an offer of my hand; and he now feels de-

lighted at the increase of your fortune, solely because it places you beyond the temptation of accepting such a preposterous proposal, if I were fool enough to make it."

"Alas!" thought Lady Mary, "if the consequences of possessing a large fortune be to make one thus suspicious of one's nearest and dearest friends and relatives, far better were it that I had remained in comparative poverty! Here is a man making himself wretched *merely* because he is rich!"

"I perceive, Lady Mary," continued Mr. Yerraway, "that you are judging me wrongfully; I am not wretched *merely* because I am rich." Here her ladyship was startled at the singular coincidence between her own thoughts and those of her visiter, who proceeded. "My property is the fruit of my own, I may say, *honest* industry and exertions in a distant clime, and has produced me many comforts and many

opportunities of doing good to others, and I looked forward to derive from it ease and tranquillity of mind in the decline of life. But all my prospects are blasted by perceiving that I am looked upon, not as a friend—not as a relative—not as a benefactor even, by those who consider themselves my heirs. For me they feel neither affection, friendship, nor gratitude; all is hope, delayed only by my lingering longer in the world than suits their good will and pleasure. They consider me merely as a rich prize arrived from the east to be wrecked here, and the sooner the wreck goes to pieces so much the sooner will they have to divide the spoil.”

“No, no,” said Lady Mary, “not so; you view things with a jaundiced eye. Having once given way to your prejudices and suspicions, you allow them to carry you farther than your better judgment, if called into action,

would permit. Your relatives may indulge hopes that you will not forget them, and the young will naturally calculate somewhat on their future expectations; but there is nothing in all this that should necessarily exclude nobler and more disinterested feelings. I am sure, if my most fervent and heartfelt prayers could restore my dear uncle to life, and bring him home to enjoy the wealth which he has so unexpectedly bequeathed to me, they should not be wanting."

"I know it—I know it, Lady Mary," exclaimed the old man, much affected; "I know the disinterestedness of your heart. You are the only person to whom I have shown any marked attention, since my return from India, who did not eagerly and instantly strive to cultivate my acquaintance and gain my good opinion, and all—all from sordid, mercenary motives. Even *you once* thought that perhaps

I might take it into my head to leave you something; but you instantly dismissed the idea, in a jocular way, by saying, ‘ Well, I would rather have the old gentleman’s money than his company.’ ”

“ Certainly, sir,” exclaimed Lady Mary, while she felt a crimson glow in her cheeks, “ Certainly I never said anything of the kind; whoever told you so abused your ear and most scandalously misrepresented me.”

“ No one told me so,” replied the aged man, fixing his small grey eyes intensely upon her, “ I alluded only to your *thoughts*: it was at Lady Frazer’s, when I availed myself of an opportunity of drawing you into conversation, much against your will.”

“ You really terrify me !” said her ladyship; “ this is the second time this evening——”

“ That I have told you your thoughts,” continued Mr. Yerraway; “ do not imagine,

then, that what I say of others is *merely* suspicion — no, I have learned their thoughts; they were as clear and distinct before me as is *now* the conviction that at this present moment you are harbouring doubts of my sanity.”

“ Amazing !” almost shrieked Lady Mary ; “ I cannot really endure this any longer ! You must excuse me, but I must leave you. I know not what to think ; it may seem weak, but I confess I am afraid of you.”

“ Fear me not, good and gentle lady,” said the old man mildly ; “ I came here to render you a service, and I entreat you to hear me patiently. I shall no longer know what passes within your breast.” Here he thrust his hand into his bosom and drew forth something, which he concealed, and immediately deposited in his coat-pocket. “ Indeed,” he continued, “ I have no desire to know your ladyship’s thoughts—why should I ? But I will not ex-

naust your patience, as that which I have to communicate will occupy some time, and will require your utmost attention. In the first place, I will explain to you the reasons why I have so frequently, for the last twelve months, sought opportunities of conversing with you. I knew your uncle many years ago. He was my junior considerably ; but, being much older than the generality of young men who came out with him, I solicited, on that account, that he might be employed under me in a lucrative appointment which I then held. We were not long together, as his merit, abilities, and the strong recommendations which he *then* had, procured him rapid advancement. You are acquainted with the disastrous consequences of that rapid advancement, and therefore I shall not repeat them. It is, however, necessary for my own justification to say, that I had left India before the period of his mis-

fortunes ; otherwise, as our friendship, though of short duration, had been warm, I should have gladly rendered him every assistance in my power. What I heard of him afterwards was vague and unsatisfactory ; people said that he was eccentric and avoided society, but that he appeared very happy in his own way, and seemed to have abandoned all idea of realizing and returning home. In this manner years rolled by, and I had long given up the expectation of hearing directly from him again, when, about eighteen months since, I received a communication through his agent, Mr. Merington, requesting to know if I was acquainted with Lady Mary Deningford, or any of her connexions. The result was that the worthy old lawyer let me into the secret of your uncle's intention of making your ladyship his heiress, provided that your conduct and character continued to be as he anticipated ; so you will

perceive, my good lady, that when I have intruded myself upon you it was as a spy, and not as a superannuated lover. Whether your uncle had any suspicion of my secret I know not; but certainly he could not have deputed the task of inquiry to any one capable of giving him more *correct* information. We have since exchanged letters, and I trust that the interview which you have recently had with Mr. Merington, will have convinced your ladyship that the prepossession which you entertained against me has not been reciprocal."

Never to the eyes of fair lady was any ugly old gentleman more suddenly beautified than was Mr. Yerraway during the course of his narration; instead of the ascetic misanthrope, Lady Mary saw before her now the friend of her uncle and her own eulogiser and benefactor, and she was eloquent in her expressions of gratitude, and of regret for having so mistaken his

character. But, when the first burst of feeling was past, her mind naturally recurred to the extraordinary fact of his having told her her thoughts, and the allusion he had made respecting her uncle's possible suspicion of his secret. What could that be?—she longed to know, but could not summon sufficient resolution to inquire. The old gentleman, however, soon turned the conversation to that subject which, he said, was the sole cause of his following and tracking her ladyship from Bath. He then proceeded to tell a long East Indian tale, which, if given verbatim, would occupy somewhat more than half a volume, and which, therefore, we shall endeavour to abridge into less formidable dimensions. .

It seems that, like most other gentlemen who have lived long “up the country,” he had formed an intimacy with certain bramins, &c. and more especially with one, who had long

been celebrated for the odour of his sanctity, though, towards his latter years, he became suspected of holding intercourse with beings of a doubtful order. This holy man was indebted for his reputation to various wearisome pilgrimages, and divers severe inflictions committed on his body. Among other pious contrivances, he once managed to insert a hook round one of his ribs, and to suspend himself by it for some uncertain length of time. So, at least, ran the report, and the evidence of it was a brace of scars, which he occasionally exhibited, for the edification of the faithful, as demurely and decently as possible. Such were his holy works; but what he did to obtain the favour of those spirits with which he was said to have been subsequently connected, never came to light.

Some few months before Mr. Yerraway's return to England, this mysterious personage

called upon him to take leave, and when they were about to separate for the last time, presented him with a small heart, curiously cut in a dark garnet-coloured stone, and elaborately set in pure gold.

“ It is not meet,” said he, “ for the giver of gifts to speak in their praise ; I therefore offer you this token of friendly homage, and shall leave it to speak for itself at some future day. Do not part with it till you know its virtues by experience. I say this because your jewellers at home may offer you much for the stone. It is of a kind which they cannot match. Many and many thousand fathom deeper than your deepest mines must the earth be excavated ere its fellow shall be found; and the workmanship of the setting, and the characters graven within and without (which you will be able to discern with one of your most powerful glasses,) are from the hands of such cunning and able

artists as those which built Tadmor in the Desert. It is a TALISMAN. Smile not.—Yes, smile and be incredulous, if you will ; but put it to the proof. When you arrive in your native land, cut off a lock of your hair and inclose it in this sniall cavity ; then all will be ready. Forget not to wear it suspended round your neck, and near your heart, on your first interview with your relations or those most *interested* in your affairs ; then, — smile if you will. Farewell ! I need not say, remember me, for I have given you that which, if used aright, will render it impossible for you to forget me. Farewell !”

Mr. Yerraway placed the trinket among his other curiosities ; and had been some weeks in England ere he thought of wearing it in the manner indicated. We give the rest in his own words :—

“ The moment that I cast my eye upon it

I recollected that it should have been worn at the *first* interview with my brother, who was then living, and engaged in commercial pursuits. He was, however, to dine with me on that day, and I expected no one else; so I suspended the talisman to a small gold chain, which I threw round my neck, scarcely able to refrain from laughing at my own credulity. My brother was almost twenty years younger than myself. He had received and welcomed me home in the warmest and most affectionate manner, and for the first fortnight after my arrival I had resided with him and his family at Camberwell. I then took a ready-furnished house in Baker Street, and there on the day in question I waited his arrival, perhaps with a little more impatience than usual, on account of the trial which I was about to make of my Indian friend's last gift. Although I could not bring myself to believe that anything could

result from my wearing one bauble rather than another, I yet felt as though warned by some inward monitor, to be upon my guard, and not to evince surprise at what was about to take place. Such was the frame of my mind when my brother entered the room, sprang forward, and shook me by the hand, exclaiming, that he was delighted to see me looking so well. There was every appearance of pleasure in his countenance as he spoke, and he pressed my hand fervently. Judge, then, of my surprise, when I heard a voice within me as if issuing from mine own heart ! It was the voice of my brother ! It came up slow and distinct, and said, in a cold, calculating manner, ‘ His hand is dry and feverish ; his eye is hollow ; and that yellowness is a sure proof that his liver is affected ! ’ I was so astonished that I cannot at all judge of my looks at the moment ; I only recollect withdrawing my hand abruptly, and

requesting him to be seated. I then threw myself into a chair, and endeavoured to collect my ideas, and be prepared for the next communication from the wonderful talisman. I had not long to wait. Again the inward voice arose, and its words were: 'This is some sudden attack! It is evident that his constitution is undermined. He is my brother, to be sure, but he went to India before I was old enough to know him, and now he has come back with notions and habits very different from mine. If he *should* die soon, it would really be a most fortunate thing for me, just at this time, when my own affairs are so sadly unprosperous!' When the voice ceased I looked up at my brother. He was gazing upon me with an expression in which my eyes could discern only the most affectionate solicitude and commiseration. 'My dear Charles,' said he, 'you are unwell; pray send for a medical man.'—'No,

Henry,' I replied, ' it is nothing ; only a trifling qualm that I am subject to. I am not yet quite accustomed to your climate, I believe.'—' I hope you have not stayed too long in India, and contracted any of the troublesome complaints which some bring home with them,' observed my brother. ' Indeed, from your appearance, and the good spirits you seem generally to be in, I cannot believe you have ; but still the germ of disease may exist, and therefore you must excuse me for urging upon you the propriety of having the best medical advice. Even for the sake of others you should not neglect yourself, for it would indeed be distressing to us all to witness your well-grounded expectations of a long and happy life gloomily changed by continued ill health.' He ceased ; and again the inward voice spake, saying, ' He has stayed too long in India, it is plain. Poor fellow ! I pity him ; but it would

have been better if he had died there. We should never have missed him then, and not have had to undergo all the tedious anxiety and inquiries, and watchings of a lingering illness, to say nothing of the irritability of temper, and consequent change of purpose, so common with persons suffering under violent bilious attacks.' At this moment we were joined by an unexpected visiter, a colonel, whom I had known in India. He entered the room with a gay air, and said, that he came to invite himself to dinner, in order to enjoy half an hour's chat afterward, about old times. The talismanic voice instantly added, 'I must talk the old nabob into good humour if I can, and get him to lend me five hundred, or, hang me if I know what I shall do, as I promised to meet Sir James to-night at Brookes's.'

"It is not necessary," continued Mr. Yerraway, "for me to weary your ladyship with the

particulars of all the various deceptions and schemes practised upon me, and revealed by this mysterious talisman. That the voices which issued from it often inflicted great pain, you cannot doubt, but mark me, my lady, they prevented me from losing nearly the whole, perhaps even the whole of my fortune. I had, already, advanced ten thousand pounds to my brother, in consequence of his representing to me the advantageous nature of the commerce in which he was engaged, and the facility with which he could increase it, if in possession of a larger capital. My confidence in him was unbounded, and, as I intended that he should inherit all I left at my death, it appeared of little consequence what amount he might have before. Alas! I found all his representations false; the money that I had lent him barely sufficed to reestablish his credit. He must, without it, have soon been a bank-

rupt ; but still, after I became acquainted with the real state of his affairs, he persevered in affirming them to be in the most flourishing condition, fearing that if I knew the truth I should leave my property in the hands of other guardians, for the benefit of his children, instead of committing everything to his own arrangement. You will not wonder that I lived but little in London after this discovery. Our subsequent communications were chiefly by letter, till his death, when he left a widow and young family totally unprovided for ; and I found, as I expected, that what remained of the ten thousand pounds was scarcely sufficient to satisfy the claims of his creditors. Of course, I took upon myself to provide for his widow, and to see that the children were properly brought up and well educated, and my nephew whom you have seen is the eldest. And now, Lady Mary, you have the history of

this small revealer, of which I beg your acceptance." Here he took the talisman from his pocket and laid it on the table. "Its power seems to be confined to uttering the thoughts of those present *only when the wearer is the subject of them, or personally interested in them.* It has told me many things that were useful, many that were painful. I wish to hear no more of either. My career is rapidly drawing to its close, and I rejoice in placing this warning voice where it is so much needed. Yes, young lady, for young you are in comparison with me, your path will henceforth be beset with parasites, flatterers, adventurers, ay, and lovers too. They will pour into your ear words which will seldom accord with the voice which you will hear from within. Did not my own experience tell the vanity of such a thought, I should wish that you might find it otherwise. I see you hesitate whether or not

to accept my gift, therefore I take my leave, and beg you to consider well ere you refuse what may never again be offered." Saying these words, the old gentleman left the talisman on the table, and withdrew.

CHAPTER IV.

“CAN this be a dream?” thought Lady Mary, as she sate alone, after her aged visiter had withdrawn.

The small, heart-shapen talisman lay upon the table before her, and appeared to shoot forth rays of light, as though enclosing a flame within. So brilliant a stone would have attracted her attention at any time; and the gold-work by which it was encircled was wrought with inimitable delicacy, in a style which she had never yet beheld. It seemed like one of those ancient regal ornaments, so intrinsically

and almost incalculably precious as to endure no comparison with the glittering baubles and fashions of the passing day.

It remained long untouched, while her ladyship was lost in meditation, if such a term may be applied to the confused state of her mind, unable to decide whether it would be better to accept or reject the extraordinary power now placed at her disposal. She felt that her sudden elevation to fortune had deranged all her former plans, and that she was without any fixed purpose for the future. Still there were certain consequences inevitable from her change of circumstances. She must form an establishment, and it would be necessary to place confidence in many individuals, of whom she could have but an imperfect knowledge. She would have to purchase a house, and to employ tradesmen and workmen of all descriptions. Nothing could be more desirable than to ascertain who

were and who were not trustworthy, and the talisman offered perfect security against imposition. It was very tempting!—but then, when she thought of Mr. Yerraway's brother, and the uncomfortable manner in which he lived with his nephew, and the ill opinion that he held of mankind in general, she trembled lest she likewise might become a misanthrope.

On this sombre view of the picture, however, she did not dwell long; the natural bias of her disposition led her to fancy that she should derive much amusement in having unveiled to her the real thoughts of such as would address her with studied flattery and well-turned complimentary phrases. It would have diverted her greatly, she imagined, to have known what passed in Major Wilburton's mind during the time of his thriftless wooing. And then her friends—her *real* friends—those who would endure and be proved by the ordeal, how much

more should she love and value them!—that thought was delightful! And she was indulging it, when the sound of footsteps at the door put an end to her reflections. In an instant, as though fearful of being detected in the practice of sorcery, she covered the talisman with her handkerchief.

“I was afraid, my lady,” said Rachel, advancing, “I was afraid that you had fallen asleep and would take cold. Does your ladyship know that it is almost midnight?”

“Midnight!” exclaimed Lady Mary; and without saying more, she fixed her eyes intently, with a strange expression, on the wondering old handmaiden.

“Mercy upon us! why you’re struck with something!” cried Rachel. “Do speak, my lady!—What *can* be the matter with her?”

“Nothing, my good Bond,” said her ladyship, smiling, “nothing—only I did not think

it had been so late; I was lost in a reverie, I believe. See that all is right in my bed-room, and come again in a quarter of an hour, and *not sooner*, that's a good soul. I am perfectly well, I assure you; do not look so incredulous."

Rachel shook her head, and muttered something inaudibly as she left the room.

"Yes," continued Lady Mary, "the temptation is irresistible! I shall not pledge myself to an acceptance of this extraordinary power by putting it to the proof; and if this faithful creature, who has watched over me from my youth, cannot endure the test, it will be vain to make farther experiments. Better to remain a dupe in blissful ignorance, than acquire such painful knowledge of the truth. But no—Rachel Bond will, I am sure, abide the trial."

Uttering these words, or rather whispering

thus to herself, she placed the talisman in the palm of her trembling hand. It immediately flew open, and a small lock of grey hair uncoiled itself and rolled out. At this plain indication that the mysterious revealer had rejected its former master, and was prepared to receive her in his place, Lady Mary felt a cold thrill pervade her whole frame; but she soon recovered her self-possession by reflecting that Mr. Yerraway had most probably purposely detached the spring. Still she hesitated. Her watch lay upon the table—ten minutes had expired—the talisman was yet open, and the small cavity within was vacant. A lock of her long dark hair hung down over her cheek, as though presenting itself for the sacrifice;—the scissors were in her tremulous hand—twelve minutes had elapsed, and the second-hand was fast beating another round; but yet the ceremony remained unperformed and the

charm incomplete. It wanted only a few seconds of the quarter, and already there was a movement of footsteps without, when she hastily severed a small portion of her hair, rolled it together, and placed it within the cavity. It seemed to her then that the two sides of the open heart clasped themselves together of their own accord; but, in the hurry and agitation of the moment, she might have been deceived.

There was not time to place the talisman in its seat of office before Rachel made her appearance; and her ladyship thought it would be quite as well to defer the trial till the bed-curtains, drawn round her, might serve to conceal those emotions which probably she should experience.

During the time of undressing, her attendant repeated her suspicions that something ailed her mistress, and would not be convinced of

the contrary. "I am afraid you have taken cold, my lady," she said; "I do think the carriage was damp. I shall be glad when you get one of your own on that account; for them that they let out to hire stand about in all weathers in all sorts of places, and many a person has caught their death in 'em, I've no doubt, and never knew how. But I told William to burn some charcoal in it to-night, and again to-morrow morning, unless the weather was very fine, and then he'll put it in the sun, with the doors and windows open, as they always used to do at Draxfort, I remember." She then proceeded to recommend water-gruel, white-wine whey, onion-porridge, and divers other infallible remedies and preventatives against colds and chills, but all her oratory was for some time without any apparent effect.

At length her ladyship said, "Really, Bond, your talk is almost sufficient to persuade one

that something is the matter, in spite of one's own feelings. So just stay in the room a little while after I am in bed, and if I fall asleep I suppose you will be convinced that all is right."

Soon after her ladyship had laid her head upon her pillow, she disengaged the talisman from the folds of her handkerchief and placed it near her heart, as had been directed. All remained silent for a few seconds, save a violent throbbing within, the result of her mental emotions. Then, as if from the innermost recesses of her own breast, a clear, distinct voice arose, which, though perfectly audible to her, she instantly felt could be heard by no one else. It was the voice of Rachel, and it said, "I hope she hasn't taken cold; a damp carriage is as bad as a damp bed, and nobody knows what may come of it. Bless my heart, suppose she should be ill! suppose she should die just now, when she's come to such a fortune!

Oh, dear! I can't bear to think of that, for she's been a good mistress to me, that I must and will say for her, though I little expected, when I first entered into her service, that we should have lived in such a cooped-up manner as we have done; if I had, I shouldn't have stayed with her, to a certainty, for John Jenkins, my lord's coachman, would have given his eyes to have had me then; but perhaps it's all for the best, for they tell me he took to drinking afterward. Well, she's got plenty of money now, however, and I dare say will do something for me in my old age, when I'm past work; but then suppose she should be carried off suddenly now, without making a will? then, I suppose, all would go to that good-for-nothing young Lord Draxfort; and service is no inheritance, and so I might go and look out for another place, or starve, for anything he'd care about me. But no, no—

I hope she'll live long and be happy; and I don't see why she shouldn't be married, only I hope she won't go and throw herself away. Oh! dear, if this fortune had but come years ago, what a thing it would have been! she might have been anything she chose. There was that young Lord Highfield—he was young then—I know he was very fond of her, and was pretty nigh making her an offer as it was, and somehow or other I hardly think she would have refused him. But there, I dare say it's all for the best, as I look upon it he can't make a very good husband, or why should Lady Highfield be always a-crying when she's by herself? no—he wasn't good enough for mistress, and all's for the best. Well, I wonder what she'll make of me when we get a large house; I can't be cook and housemaid and lady's maid and all *then*, that's certain. I don't think she can do better than keep me for

her own woman, for I know how she likes to have things, and all her ways, though I don't know, perhaps she'll change them too now—and, for the matter o' that, she wasn't like herself to-night; when I told her it was almost twelve o'clock, she stared at me as if she didn't know me. I never saw her look so before, and never want to see her look so again; if I'd only just come into her service, I should have thought she suspected me of stealing something. I shouldn't wonder, though, if that old fright of a man hadn't been putting some strange fancies into her head, for his own is full of them, they say. Heigho! I hope it won't be long before she goes to sleep, for I want to go to bed sadly. This travelling, when a body isn't used to it, makes one very sleepy, and it's going on for one o'clock. Heigho! I'm not so young as I was quite, neither!"

As these last words were reported to her by the talisman, Lady Mary perceived a slight movement in one of the bed-curtains, and therefore immediately closed her eyes and feigned to be asleep. Old Rachel peeped in, and after making her observations withdrew without uttering a word; but the inward voice exclaimed, "She is fast asleep. God bless her! she breathes sweetly. I don't think there's anything the matter with her, after all. I dare say she's dreaming of all the fine things she will have when she gets to town. Well, that's all natural; but God send she may keep a merry heart! say I; that's better than riches."

The mental soliloquy which she had heard kept her ladyship long awake. It was evident that her old servant was attached to her, but it was also plain that she indulged in calculations of future benefit as the reward of that attachment. This Lady Mary allowed to be no

more than natural, but still, it was not a pleasing truth to be assured of. Then, the original engagement in her service had been a matter of pure, cold speculation, in which the advantages looked forward to were to have arisen from her marriage or prosperity, while a knowledge of the slender income which was to be allotted to her, would have prevented Rachel from continuing with her. But far more painful than all this was the surmise respecting her probable acceptance of Lord Highfield as a suitor, in case he had offered himself. Whatever her feelings might have been towards that nobleman, they had remained concealed within her own breast, and, as she hitherto believed, unsuspected by any. In vain she endeavoured to look back and trace her conduct, in order to discover what there could have been in it to lead her old servant to the conclusion which she had drawn. Rachel had always been her

humble friend, but she had never made her her confidant in affairs of the heart, according to the custom of heroines of romance or the stage, and perhaps some few in real life. The idea of being supposed weak enough to harbour a predilection towards a man who had shunned her society was extremely degrading, and she could not help feeling that Rachel had injured her by the supposition. Perhaps, if she had been able without any mental reservation to declare that the notion was false, she might have dismissed the subject with a smile, but there were certain recollections which prevented her from so doing.

There was also another expression made use of by the talismanic voice, which made her uneasy, and that was the denouncement of her eldest nephew, now her natural heir, as the "good-for-nothing Lord Draxfort." What ground could there be for such an appellation?

She had never heard anything of his lordship to induce her to suppose that he merited it, and yet Rachel was not accustomed to form harsh opinions of any one. It was very perplexing.

Musing on these subjects, and all the various reflections and recollections connected with them, her ladyship passed a restless night. Still, though such was the result of her first experiment with the talisman, she had not come to a settled resolution of returning it to its former owner, when she was informed that he had left the inn at break of day, and taken the road towards Bath. The question was thus settled for the present.

“ Yes,” said she, after some attempt at meditating on the subject, “ I will wear it for a day or two. I shall become accustomed to its extraordinary powers. I must have to confide in many persons with whom I am at present

unacquainted. It will guide me to select the worthiest, and then, when my arrangements are made, I will return it to Mr. Yerraway."

While dressing, therefore, she contrived to avail herself of Rachel's momentary absence, and suspended the talisman to a chain that she wore round her neck. Scarcely was it in its place ere the aged damsel re-entered the room, and immediately the inward voice began chattering away in a most incoherent style, and at a prodigious rate; each word was as distinctly uttered as on the former occasion, but all were confused and unconnected. It talked much of what a fine thing it would be to live in a fine house in one of the squares, and how the people would stare, and how the speaker would be courted by the tradesfolk, but that she wouldn't be cheated if she was made housekeeper, as she knew how to go to market now as well as the best of them. Then it spoke of John Jenkins,

the coachman, and wondered if he had got a good place, as, if not, she thought he would suit her mistress very well, as he was always very steady, even when young, and perhaps the report about his having taken to drinking was all false. Then it wondered if her ladyship would hire all the servants she meant to keep directly, and go to the expense of putting them all in black, or whether she wouldn't wait till the time of mourning for her uncle was passed, and so "come out" all at once in dashing liveries. An enumeration of the men and maid-servants whom it would be necessary to keep, followed ; and after that came a rough and strangely erroneous calculation of the amount of their mourning suits, all to be thrown away for no end or good, as the good old gentleman, who had been dead so long ago in foreign parts, would be none the better nor any the wiser for such a waste of his money.

Amid all her wonderings and bewilderment, however, there were two leading features which were always prominent in her mental discourse: the one was joy at her mistress' sudden elevation to riches, and the other was self-gratification and self-approbation at having stuck to her ladyship "through thick and thin;" and the latter was attended by numerous anticipations of cast-off gowns, bonnets, caps, pelisses, shawls, &c. &c. and other contingent beneficial perquisites attendant on the situation of "own woman" to a titled and wealthy heiress.

Some of these things her ladyship would rather not have heard, but upon the whole the jumble was amusing, and she sat down to breakfast in better spirits than those with which she had risen.

The next person that underwent the ordeal was old William, who did not stand the test quite so well as Rachel. It seemed to be the

object of his ambition to be installed as butler in her ladyship's new establishment; and his reasons for selecting that post were, because, in the first place, he fancied himself qualified by having served for some years as waiter at the York House, and secondly, (or perhaps principally,) the pleasure he should experience in now and then "cracking a bottle of her ladyship's wine with some of his old acquaintances, in order to learn their opinion of its quality." These enjoyments he purposed to manage in some way by which the said bottles should "never be missed." It is almost needless to say, that Lady Mary decided against his subterranean promotion.

When breakfast was ended, and her carriage stood waiting at the door, a waiter entered to make the important announcement; and immediately after he had performed his duty in the most respectful style, the talisman, assuming his

voice, said, " Hang her ! she 's not such a bad-looking piece of goods neither ; not much the wrong side of thirty, I should think. She 'll have no need to advertise for a husband *now*, I 'll warrant. ' 'Tis money makes the mare go ;' many a worse than she 's gone off with a precious sight less than old Bill says she 's got." Here followed a coarse criticism upon her eyes, complexion, figure, and ankles, which need not be repeated. Her ladyship was taken so by surprise that she felt the blood mount into her cheeks at this insult.—" Preciously modest, however," continued the voice ; " can't bear to be looked at by a man ! Bless us ! not used to be waited upon, I suppose,—soon will be though, now she 's rich. If I was a vain fellow I 'll be hanged if I shouldn't think she was in love with me by that blushing ; and more unlikely things than that have happened before now — but I 'm married and can't come, so hat 's no go, my lady."

“ This is intolerable !” thought Lady Mary, putting her hand into her bosom as soon as the man had withdrawn. “ I cannot submit to be tormented thus with the impertinent thoughts of *every* one ;” and she was about to remove the talisman when Rachel entered the room with her cloak and shawls, and frustrated her purpose for the moment, as she well knew that the display of a fresh article of jewellery would lead to endless questions, which she should be unable to answer.

As she passed to her carriage, amid the most profound silence and respectful salutations of the whole household, voices from within, both male and female, uttered very free remarks upon her person, dress, and appearance, wished for half her money, and supposed some ruined gamester would be glad to “ snap her up ” for the sake of it.

When seated in the carriage, she told Rachel

never in future to say anything to the people at inns about her circumstances, and desired her to give the same instructions to William.

“Certainly, my lady,” replied Rachel. “To be sure, I thought the bill was rather high ; but then, you know, when gentlefolks travel in their own carriage, and have the best rooms, and everything of the best, they always charge more than if it was a stage-coach passenger.”

When she had thus spoken the inward voice continued — “La ! I hope mistress isn’t going to be mean now she’s got so much money ! They say, that the more people have of it the more they love it, and grudge every farthing. I suppose *that* Mr. Yelloway, or whatever his name is, has been putting some of his notions in her head, as his man says he knows everything that goes forward in his own house, and turned away his last butler for not putting a bottle of wine back into the cellar, which was

brought up when he had some gentlemen to dinner, but not decanted ; and sometimes, when he travels with his own horses, he goes into the stable himself to see the ostler measure and give them their corn, for fear he should be cheated of two or three pen'orth."

" I was not alluding to the charges at the inn, Bond," said Lady Mary, not quite with her usual mildness ; " why should you put such an unfavourable construction on my words ? You know that when I was poor I never grudged any expense that I could afford ; I only wish to avoid being made the subject of general conversation and remark among people whom the state of my affairs cannot in the least degree concern, so long as they are paid for the services which I require at their hands. I *know* that you and William too must have been talking a great deal about my property last night, and perhaps it is better to let you

know at once that the consequence of your doing so was that I was insulted; so pray be more guarded for the future."

Poor Rachel's indignation knew no bounds at the idea of her ladyship having been insulted; she absolutely raved, and wanted to know who the person could have been that dared to be guilty of such an offence—when it was committed, and how, and what had been said or done. As her mistress did not think fit to enlighten her by stating these particulars, and requested that the affair should never be again mentioned, she endeavoured to appear resigned, and to content herself by crying and sobbing, in her intervals of vituperation against the unknown offender. Still, however, the internal voice was constantly jabbering to Lady Mary, accusing in rotation every person about the house they had left, from the landlord and landlady to the post-boys and the boots; but at

length it settled upon old Mr. Yerraway, and decided that he had followed her ladyship from Bath for the express purpose, and vowed to be revenged upon him, in some way, on the very first opportunity. Lady Mary resolved to destroy this prejudice immediately; and therefore, resuming her usual manner, told Rachel that the old gentleman had been acquainted with her uncle in India, and that she felt greatly obliged to him for his friendly visit and the interesting particulars with which he had furnished her. This information, so far from quieting the internal chattering, produced a fresh series of strange conjectures; to get rid of which her ladyship thought proper to enter into oral conversation upon different subjects, and principally on those which related to the manner in which it would be best for her to live till she should meet with a residence to her mind.

On these topics she spoke to Rachel as a

friend, and asked her opinion and advice, and nothing could be more humble than her replies ; but again the talismanic voice interfered, and showed her ladyship a very unexpected feature in the old handmaiden's character, for she had no sooner said, " Oh, certainly, my lady ;" or " Your ladyship is perfectly right ;" or " Your ladyship knows best," than the internal revealer added, " I don't think that will last long." " Well, well, try it ; but I shouldn't do so if I was in her place." " I know better than that ; but it's no use talking, for she will have her own way." Now and then, to be sure, by way of atonement for this self-contradiction, there came an affectionate expression such as " Bless her ! I hope her money will make her happy !" But, in spite of these, Lady Mary soon became weary and disgusted with what she heard, and removed the talisman to her pocket, where it remained till they arrived in London.

CHAPTER V.

MR. MERINGTON had a long interview with Lady Mary, on the morning after her arrival in town, and the talisman was of course employed on an occasion of so much importance.

The voice was not now so incessantly chattering as when with Rachel in the carriage, and sometimes there were long intervals of silence, during which her ladyship concluded the worthy old gentleman to be engaged in cogitations unconnected with her affairs; such of his thoughts, however, as were revealed to her were perfectly satisfactory.

When she consigned to him the entire management of her pecuniary affairs, and he had thanked her, and appeared much affected and gratified by her confidence, the talismanic words which followed were, "This is exactly as I wished. My worthy friend's legacy will enable me to give up my practice to my children, and henceforth I shall employ myself solely in watching over the interests of his niece; it will just be sufficient occupation for me now, and no task could be more delightful to my old age than that of thus evincing my respect to the memory of him who has furnished me with the means of spending my latter days in ease and comfort. And my dear boys, too! they may now enjoy the fruits of their industry, and look forward to——"

Here the voice ceased, doubtless because the old gentleman's thoughts wandered from her ladyship's concerns to those of his own family

circle. It appeared evident, from much that transpired, that though he had long followed his profession, he had not thereby succeeded in enriching himself; and Lady Mary understood afterward that he went by the name of "the honest lawyer," a title seldom bestowed on those who endeavour "to make the most of everything" that falls into their hands. It was delightful to find herself in possession of so valuable a friend, and she resolved to confide in him implicitly, and to ask his advice on every subject connected with her future arrangements. The first and most important affair was the purchase of a house, and she requested him to make inquiry for one that would be proper for the establishment which he thought she ought to keep, as she should be guided by his judgment.

Mr. Merington had anticipated this commission, and recommended a house in Cavendish

Square, the lease of which was to be sold, subject only to a small ground-rent, for ten thousand pounds. "If your ladyship is at leisure," he continued, "I will accompany you to see it immediately."

The proposal was accepted; and when they had visited the mansion, both decided that it was really, as set forth in the advertisement, "a most desirable residence." Even Rachel, who accompanied them as a matter of course, professed herself perfectly contented with it, and no contradictory voice arose to shake confidence in her professions.

They then returned to the hotel wherein Lady Mary had taken up her temporary residence, and a note was despatched requesting the immediate attendance of the agent to whom the sale was intrusted, Mr. Merington still remaining with her ladyship as her man of business.

When the house and land agent made his appearance the inward voice ejaculated, in a strange tone : “ One doesn’t have a three hundred thousand pounder to deal with every day. She got it easy enough too, and ‘ easy come, easy go,’ they say, so I’ll try to make the most of her.”

Mr. Merington began the conversation, in a business-like way, by stating, that a considerable sum must be laid out upon the house before it would be fit to receive her ladyship ; that one room wanted papering, another painting, and so forth ; and, when all those things were taken into consideration, expressed a wish to be informed of the very lowest price.

“ My instructions are, ten thousand guineas,” replied the agent, “ but, to be candid with you, I believe pounds will be taken, and *that* is the *very* lowest farthing.”

The talisman hereupon said : “ We should

be very glad to get nine thousand. I offered it to that West Indian merchant for eight thousand five hundred guineas, fixtures and all, last week, but he wouldn't bite, though I'm sure he'll not meet a better bargain. I'd buy it myself at that, if I had the money, and run the chance of letting it."

"Pray," asked Mr. Merington seriously, "are there any fixtures to be taken, and, if so, what may be the probable amount?"

"Oh yes, certainly;" said the agent, "in a mansion of that description there are always some, of course, but they are all useful and good, everything of the best; and they won't come heavy. I can't say exactly how much, but at a rough guess I should suppose about a couple of hundred pounds."

"I'll take pretty good care to whip 'em for her up to five hundred at least," added the inward voice.

Lady Mary sat for some time a silent auditor of what was spoken and thought by both parties. At length she perceived that the volubility of the agent had wrought so powerfully upon Mr. Merington that he was about to recommend her to make an offer of nine thousand five hundred, exclusive of fixtures:—"No," said she to herself, "I will not suffer the good old man to be mortified by my refusal of his first advice, nor, in spite of the 'easy' manner in which I got my fortune, will I be the dupe of this low fellow. It is better for me to speak at once."

Accordingly, to the astonishment of both her hearers, and more particularly of the agent, whom she addressed, she said: "I have listened very attentively to all that has passed, and have made up my mind to give you eight thousand five hundred guineas, including the whole of the fixtures. It is useless to enter into any

discussion on the subject ; you have now my decision and my offer, and if it be not very speedily accepted, I think it more than probable that I shall be induced to retract it."

The agent stared, and declared it to be impossible that such a price could be taken, and that he really could not, conscientiously, recommend his employer to make such a sacrifice.

The talismanic voice exclaimed — " That West Indian must have been blabbing, or she never would have hit upon the exact sum. And yet they say she only came to town last night, and nobody but this old gentleman has been to see her. It won't do to let her slip, though, for these big houses are not everybody's price, so I'll pretend to go and consult my employer."

As this was Lady Mary's first triumph, she enjoyed the thing exceedingly, not so much because she had saved a few hundreds, as that she

had been enabled to thwart what she considered a roguish scheme upon her purse, and, in the height of her exultation, without calculating upon consequences, she resolved to humiliate the offender to the very uttermost. Accordingly, when he made his proposition of retiring for the purpose of consulting with his employer, she observed, that possibly she might change her mind before his return, but certainly she should not consider herself bound to abide by her offer after he quitted the room. The bewildered agent remonstrated and appealed to Mr. Merington, who knew not what to say or think, but ventured to observe, that it was customary for agents to consult with their principals whenever any sort of offer was made, unless their instructions were perfectly definite.

“Just as the gentleman pleases,” said Lady Mary; “but remember, that our sex claim

the privilege of changing our minds, and certainly I shall not forego my right on the present occasion."

The old lawyer observed her laughing eye and merry mood with especial wonder, and the voice of his thoughts said—"Really I cannot perceive where the joke lies, but, if this be a specimen of the manner in which she means to consult me, and to be guided by my advice, I shall have very little responsibility left on my shoulders."

The agent now again addressed himself to the old gentleman, calculating on his influence with her ladyship. He represented how unreasonable it was to expect him to take such responsibility upon himself, while at the same time he hinted that offers had been so rare that he did not feel himself justified in giving a positive refusal to any, and probably his employer might be induced to agree to "divide the difference."

“ I hear all that passes !” exclaimed Lady Mary gaily, “ so, to save time and useless talking, there is my watch ;” (and she laid it on the table ;) “ I will give you five minutes, and not a second more. At the end of that time the house will be mine or I shall look out for another.”

The agent attempted to argue.

“ No, no,” said her ladyship, laughing, “ not a word unless it be directly to the point. ‘ To be or not to be, that is the question.’ Let me have plain yes or no. I am perfectly aware, as you were observing, that the house is a house, and as for its recommendations and conveniences, and so forth, they are, doubtless, too various to be enumerated at this present sitting, more than half of which is already expired.”

“ I will throw you in the fixtures for ten thousand,” said the agent.

Lady Mary smiled, shook her head, and pointed at the watch.

“ I cannot bear to refuse an offer when money is so scarce,” observed the agent ; “ I will endeavour to meet your ladyship if possible : — Let us say at once, we will divide the difference.”

Lady Mary repeated her movement of dissent, and added : “ Four minutes are past !”

“ I perceive,” continued the agent, “ that your ladyship has been made acquainted with an offer we made some time since, but I assure you, on my honour, the fixtures were not included, only some trifling articles ; and the value of first-rate houses has much increased since. My employer, too, was then much in want of money, whereas now the case is quite different. However, as the offer was made I ’ll take upon me to abide by it in your ladyship’s case, and you may depend on having the fixtures at a *fair* valuation.”

The former silent negative was the only reply. The eyes of all three were fixed upon the regular march of the second hand. Lady Mary smiled triumphantly. Mr. Merington looked somewhat like a countryman just come to town, watching and waiting the instant when the antique figures were wont to strike the bell and the hour at old St. Dunstan's church in Fleet Street. It was all beyond his comprehension. The agent bit his lips and writhed in his chair, as though it had been a trap closed upon him; but just as the minute was about to expire he exclaimed, "I agree to your ladyship's proposal!"

"And *now*, my dear sir," said Lady Mary, turning towards Mr. Merington, "I leave the rest of the affair entirely to you. Do not consider this as a specimen of the manner in which I mean to consult you and to be guided by your advice; I shall leave plenty of affairs on your shoulders, depend upon it."

“ My lady !” exclaimed the old man, staring with surprise at this reference to his own thoughts. Her ladyship immediately perceived her mistake, and looked confused in her turn, but soon recovered herself and observed —

“ I certainly owe you some apology for thus thrusting myself forward in this affair, and it is very natural for me to fear that you may suppose such to be my usual line of conduct ; do not, however, imagine anything of the sort ; but the fact is, I was tempted ; I felt an irresistible inclination ; I could not withstand it.”

Mr. Merington begged that she would not conceive any apology necessary, and congratulated her upon the able manner in which she had concluded the transaction. But when he ceased speaking, the inward voice continued :—
“ It turned out very well *as it happened*, but these ‘irresistible inclinations’ of taking the cudgels into her own hands and striking bar-

gains for thousands in five minutes, will never do. When I saw her at Bath I thought she was almost too humble, and had not sufficient confidence in herself, but I certainly shall not entertain any fears of that kind in future."

Soon after this the worthy old gentleman took his leave, in order to inspect the title-deeds, and make arrangements for completing the purchase.

As soon as it was known that Lady Mary was in possession of a house, she was beset by shoals of tradespeople, all recommending themselves very strenuously, and some strongly recommended by others. Those whom she patronised were often as much surprised as gratified with their success, for they were not always the most dashing or fashionable in their respective lines; but, as they were selected with the assistance of the talisman, it may be conjectured that they were fair-dealing persons.

The assurance of having directed her expenditure into channels where it would be beneficial to worthy individuals, could not but be gratifying to a heart like her ladyship's; and the communications of the inward voice sometimes afforded her considerable amusement, when in the presence of those who dealt largely in protestations and promises which were at variance with their thoughts and intentions. The mode, likewise, which she sometimes adopted of giving orders and bespeaking articles diverted her, while it astounded those whom she employed. Instead of inquiring the cost, she would state the exact price that she intended to give, and that, of course, was always the lowest sum which the tradesman had made up his mind to take.

From these transactions she gained the character of being exceedingly shrewd, and an excellent judge of the value of goods, and

more than once heard the complimentary thought, that "it was a pity she was a lady, as she would have made a capital tradesman's wife." There was one description of persons, however, among whom she found it hard to make a choice; these were the horse-dealers. To say nothing of the coarse language used by the talismanic voice when they were present, there were such striking points of difference between its revelations and the descriptions orally given of the animals for sale, as to render any kind of offer a perfect lottery. Those which were "warranted steady in harness" were either naturally dull and lazy, or had "done their work," and were fairly worn out. Then others had spavins, windgalls, splints, thrushes, and divers more ailments and blemishes, the nature of which Lady Mary understood not, but felt that they would not be so studiously concealed unless of some import-

ance. Still it was absolutely necessary to have horses; and she had almost come to the decision of laying aside the talisman and taking her chance, like other people, when John Jenkins, her father's old coachman, applied for admission into her service.

"You can't think how he is altered, my lady," said Rachel, who brought the news of her old beau's re-appearance; "I'm sure I shouldn't have known him if I'd met him in the street. But that's the way with us all in the course of years; I dare say I'm altered a little myself, though I don't know it. *He* says he should have known *me* anywhere, though."

The idea of hiring an old servant of her father's was exceedingly gratifying to her ladyship, and she gave orders for his admittance into her presence. What recollections she had of him were those of her early youth, and they depicted him as a large, portly-looking man,

dressed in a splendid livery, and sitting on his exalted seat of office. Consequently, when a thin, pale, elderly person, tightly buttoned up to the chin in a brown great coat, entered the room, she was much surprised. In reply to her inquiries he stated, that he had seen a great deal of trouble since he left Draxfort Hall, and that latterly he had not been able to get into any regular place, but was employed occasionally by some of the London livery-stable keepers who let out job-carriages and horses.

The inward voice from the talisman added, "I know that a good deal I've suffered was my own fault. But I'm sure no man can be more steady than I've been lately; and if I could but get into a good place like yours once more, I'd take precious good care to keep it—they must be hard masters and mistresses that I didn't try to please anyhow."

“ You can have a character, I suppose, Jenkins?” asked Lady Mary.

“ I can refer your ladyship to several of the livery-stable keepers,” replied the coachman; “ but the last regular master that I lived with is gone abroad with his regiment.”

Lady Mary observed, that stable-keepers were not exactly the sort of persons she would wish to be brought in contact with more than was absolutely necessary; and then added, “ I forget now, Jenkins how it was that you left Draxfort.”

“ Why, my lady,” replied he, “ after your father’s death, your brother, the late Lord Draxfort, changed a good many of the servants, and I was one among the rest. The only reason he gave me was, that he didn’t mean to keep two coachmen, and had got one of his own, that he hired in town before he came to the title.” The talisman then added, “ It

won't do to tell her the truth; but I know he turned me away for an old grudge he owed me because I wouldn't let him drive at night; and if I had, why he'd have overturned the carriage with my lord and the ladies in it, and all the blame would have been laid on me, and I should have been turned off for that; that's the way with us servants. There's no knowing what to do sometimes; serving one master properly, one offends another."

"Are you a good judge of horses?" asked her ladyship.

"Why, for the matter o' that, my lady," replied Jenkins, "it's a bold word for any man to say that he's a good judge, but I haven't had so much to do with 'em without learning something, and I don't think they'd take me in very easily."

"Well, my good man," said Lady Mary, "at all events you must know more than I do

of such dealings, and as I must have horses before a coachman will be necessary, I think the best way of renewing our acquaintance will be for you to buy me a pair; observe, I shall trust entirely to your judgment, and I do not mind the price, provided that they be worth the money and perfectly steady."

The poor fellow returned thanks in his best manner, and when he had finished the inward voice continued. "God bless her! why she's just as unsuspecting as when she was a child! she's something like a mistress! Well, *this is* a Godsend! I shall get a few guineas commission fairly by this job; but I'll take care they sha'n't come out of her pocket. Then I shall be able to buy linen and so on, to come decently into place, instead of being obliged to borrow a great coat to button myself up in, that she mightn't see how shabby I am."

He was about to leave the room, when her

ladyship thought of Rachel, and said, "Pray, Jenkins, are you married?"

"No, my lady," was the reply; "but I have been, the worse luck for me. My wife was a milliner, and so when we married we set up a shop with my savings, and she was to mind it; but somehow or other, I never could tell how, things went all the wrong way. I'm afraid she didn't understand the business, or wasn't careful enough:—but there—poor soul! she's dead and gone, and so one shouldn't speak ill of them that can't speak to defend themselves; and she always stuck to it that it was none of her fault." The talismanic voice then began. "If I was to say that I had been arrested for the shop-debts and thrown into prison, I suppose her ladyship, in spite of all her goodness, would be just like all the rest of the world, and have nothing more to do with me. Let but a poor fellow once see the inside

of a prison, no matter for what, and everybody ever afterward sets him down for a rascal all the rest of his life !”

“ Have you any family ?” asked Lady Mary.

“ Not now, my lady,” he replied, mournfully. And the voice added, “ Poor Betsy ! she was but a child ; but I think she died of a broken heart—I never shall forget how she looked when she came to see me in prison !”

Her ladyship asked no more questions, and, when left alone, congratulated herself upon the power which the talisman had afforded her of saving a poor fellow from sinking into the dregs of society. “ Certainly,” said she, “ were it not for his thoughts, I should not feel justified in admitting him into my house upon the recommendation of a stable-keeper of whom I know nothing. And what the voice says respecting his being arrested is but too true.

Had such a report reached me, I should not have dared to hire him; I should have been afraid of having him under the same roof with me. The circumstance of his having been in prison alone would have appeared a blemish in his character, and I should not have been at the trouble of investigating particulars; I should have left him to his fate, and probably engaged some one not half so worthy of my confidence."

In due course poor Jenkins purchased the horses and was installed in his place; and the whole of her ladyship's establishment was completely arranged ere the period of "deep mourning" for her uncle had fully passed.

In the mean while, though she kept herself nominally secluded from the world, it had been impossible to avoid the occasional intrusion of certain persevering individuals claiming the privilege of old acquaintance. Many were

their congratulations, and warm were their expressions of friendly delight, at the brilliant change in Lady Mary's prospects; but, alas! whenever she happened to wear the talisman in their presence, she was doomed to hear far other things than those which were uttered. Envy was often painfully prominent on these occasions; and even when the voice admitted candidly that riches could not have fallen into better hands, it was ever with reference to some anticipated self-gratification. One looked forward to a series of invitations and gay parties; another resolved, if possible, to become her ladyship's bosom friend and adviser, but not without certain mean calculations on the contingent and eventual advantages of such a post. Some trusted that she would be useful in introducing their daughters into society, or hoped she might "take a fancy" to one or more of their children; and there were not wanting a few who indulged themselves in paltry spe-

culations upon her ladyship's partiality for a rubber. The possessor of the talisman, however, was not ill pleased with the generality of these interviews, and promised herself much amusement in thwarting the schemes so strangely revealed to her. They served, moreover, as practice, to familiarise her with contradictions, such as she would too probably meet when in the presence of those concerning whose characters she felt a deeper interest. There were several persons whom she longed to subject to the ordeal. The first was her most intimate and oldest female friend, Lady Derwent, then in Scotland, where her husband, the general, had a command. The second was her nephew and natural heir, Lord Draxfort, who, she understood, was at Melton Mowbray, for the hunting-season. The third was, perhaps, Lord Highfield; and of others she thought occasionally.

CHAPTER VI.

HENRY ALWYN was what is commonly called "a tall, fine, dashing-looking fellow," about thirty years of age. He had dashed through a very handsome fortune with rapidity and *éclat*, but still contrived to keep his groom, his hunter, and his hack, and to mingle with the world. How he managed to do so, was a mystery to many, but not to all; and among the number of those who were, to their cost, made acquainted with his ways and means, was Lord Draxfort. They were "very particular friends," and were sitting together at breakfast one morning, when Mr. Alwyn, holding the

newspaper in his hand, exclaimed, "You must really go to London, my lord, to see this aunt of yours—here's her name again!"

"Eh! what has she been at now?" inquired Lord Draxfort, yawning; "giving away some more flannels, I suppose. I'd a great mind to be very angry with her about the lot she sent down to Draxfort for the parson to give to the poor, when they don't want anything of the sort. They're all very well off, and giving things only makes them discontented; whatever you give once, they fancy they've a right to always."

"Well, well—they can't compel you to give, that's some comfort," said Mr. Alwyn; "but it is quite a different matter with your aunt now. Here are all the particulars of her dress at the Duchess of Grinsdale's grand ball, and not a word about flannel in the whole affair. They call her 'the charming Lady Mary Deningford,'

too; that doesn't quite accord with your description of her."

"Hang her! I hate to think of her," said his lordship. "Such a fortune as that to slip through one's fingers! How could I possibly guess that the old miser in India was so rich? If I had, I should of course have shown him some attention."

"Not a doubt of it," observed Mr. Alwyn; "and yet may it please your calculating lordship to take notice, that your 'charming' aunt is little less wealthy, although unhonoured by your attention."

"Didn't I send her a letter of congratulation?" asked Lord Draxfort, testily.

"Why yes, that's very true," replied his friend; "but one visit is worth fifty letters. I know that if I had the good luck to possess such an aunt, I would make the most of her."

"Yes," said Lord Draxfort, "you would

borrow a few thousands of her, just to convince her of your ability to get rid of them, and so lose her confidence. No, no—I'm in no hurry to see her. I've never been in the habit of visiting her before, and if I were suddenly to begin now, she would naturally conclude that it was on account of her money. She thinks of nothing else just now; but let the novelty wear off. She will have had plenty of flatterers and sycophants about her, to disgust her, in a short time, and then she will like me the better for not having made one of the number."

"But *if*," said Mr. Alwyn — "*if*," and he began singing,

" ' Across her, meanwhile, came a tall Irish beau,
Who, like me, in pocket was peery,'

you might then have no great reason to congratulate yourself on being, as was said of a certain volunteer-corps, so ' backward in coming forward.' "

“ My aunt is not a fool,” observed his lordship, with a half-sulky air.

“ ‘ She is a woman, therefore may be wooed ;
She is a woman, therefore may be won,’ ”

replied Mr. Alwyn.

“ Pish !” ejaculated Lord Draxfort, rising from table. “ Do you mean to give me my revenge at billiards this morning ?”

“ With all my heart,” was the reply, and they immediately adjourned to play.

The rain fell in torrents all the morning. His lordship had experienced what he called a run of ill luck on the preceding evening, and was consequently a trifle more irritable than usual. This mood, added to the very high opinion he had of his own skill and science, led to the usual result—he lost ; proposed a rubber of five games for “ double or quits :” won the first—lost the second—won the third, got into better spirits—lost the fourth by a single hazard

—made sure of the fifth, and lost it by what he pronounced to be a mere piece of luck and excessive bad play on the part of his adversary, who instantly admitted the fact, and in his turn proposed another rubber for “double or quits.” This terminated much in the same manner as the first. “Luck” was against his lordship; but the infatuation was upon him, and he continued to double the stakes, and find fault with his antagonist’s play, till in the end he found himself minus eight hundred pounds. He then, either by accident or design, broke his favourite cue, and declared that he had a great mind to make a vow not to play again while he remained at Melton.

About a week after this match at billiards between the two friends, Lady Mary was at a select party of some three or four hundred persons, at the mansion of a fashionable dowager duchess in Grosvenor Square. She had several

times observed a remarkably elegant-looking man fixing his eyes upon her in a very particular manner. Since her acquisition of riches, such kind of notice from strangers had been so common, that she seldom gave herself the trouble of inquiring who they were; but on the present occasion she was struck with the perseverance and the stealthy manner with which she was scrutinized by the person in question, and regretted much that the talisman was not at its post.

The reason why she had left it at home was one of a very simple nature, and one that she wondered she had not foreseen. The first time she wore it in a large party, instead of giving her any information, by speaking distinctly in one voice, there arose a confusion of tongues, a mingled chattering and buzzing of voices, most of which were unknown to her; and what was uttered by those which she at intervals re-

cognised was lost in the general clamour. If was thus evident that its services would be valuable only in small circles, till the novelty of her altered position in society should cease to attract attention.

There are always so many persons ever anxious to make themselves useful to the rich, even on the most trifling occasions, that, a few minutes after Lady Mary had inquired who the stranger was, she learnt that his name was Alwyn, and that he was the intimate friend of her nephew Lord Draxfort.

“ I should like to be introduced to him,” said her ladyship, with her usual frankness.

The hint was sufficient—the introduction almost immediately took place, and the delighted Mr. Alwyn soon found himself engaged in familiar conversation with the person whose good opinion he wished to gain beyond that of all others.

“ My nephew is fond of hunting ?” asked her ladyship.

The reply was in the affirmative.

“ They tell me that you are his intimate friend,” said Lady Mary. “ Perhaps you can tell me whether we are likely to see him soon in town ?”

“ I have the honour of his lordship’s acquaintance,” replied Mr. Alwyn ; “ perhaps it is saying too much to call myself his intimate friend ; but I have certainly taken the liberty of a friend in endeavouring to persuade him to leave Melton.”

This was spoken in a peculiar tone and manner, which excited her ladyship’s curiosity, and she inquired if he had any particular reasons for urging Lord Draxfort to leave Melton.

“ I hardly know how to answer the question, my lady,” said Mr. Alwyn ; “ perhaps I have no absolute *reasons*, but feeling for him that

interest which one friend cannot avoid feeling towards another, I could have wished him to come to town, or at least, not to remain where he is."

"You must have *some* motive for such a wish," said her ladyship. "Be candid with me."

"None worth mentioning, probably," answered Mr. Alwyn. "If you knew me better, my lady, you would not, perhaps, attach such importance to my words. The fact is, that I believe I am apt to entertain prejudices and suspicions somewhat uncharitably, but I have been myself, in earlier days, the dupe of professed friends, and I would rather that his lordship should profit by my experience than by his own."

"You interest and alarm me, sir," said Lady Mary. "Remember, he is the principal person of our—of my father's house, and therefore I must take a deep interest in all that con-

cerns him ; so let me intreat you to be candid with me."

" I would wish to be so," replied Mr. Alwyn, " but —" and he hesitated and looked round expressively.

" I understand you," said Lady Mary. " This is not, perhaps, exactly the fittest place for confidential communications. Will you favour me with a call to-morrow morning? Come early, that we may not be interrupted ; the earlier the better, as I shall feel very anxious till I see you again."

Here her ladyship was accosted by one of those persons who would fain make the world believe that they are always in a state of ecstasy ; and as he expressed his delight at seeing her look so well, and began eulogizing the lady of the mansion and the elegance and purity of taste displayed in the whole arrangements of the evening, Mr. Alwyn withdrew,

observing respectfully, that he would not neglect her ladyship's commands.

“ You are acquainted with that gentleman ? ” asked the intruder.

“ Scarcely,” replied Lady Mary ; “ he has just been introduced to me.”

“ I was delighted to see him here,” observed the ecstatic : “ her Grace's patronage may be of service to him. Oh ! she is all goodness and amiability ! Such a heart ! What a blaze of beauty we have here to-night ! Never have I seen it equalled except at your ladyship's select party ; I was in raptures there. What a selection you made ! Not a person who would not have attracted general attention elsewhere ; yet all content, all happy — no pretension — *sans façon* ! Ah ! that was a delightful night ! What charming sylphs those three Miss Pinchbacks are ! the three Graces personified ! Do look, too, at Lady Squash ! the

very picture of happiness ! It does one good to look at her."

As her would-be entertainer continued to utter similar nothings, Lady Mary caught a glimpse of Mr. Alwyn, in apparently earnest conversation with Lord Highfield, whom she had not before seen during the winter, and of whose arrival in town she was not aware. At the sight of him she again regretted the absence of her talisman, and then fell into a series of youthful recollections, such as have already been hinted at. His lordship looked pale, and an air of melancholy overspread those features which formerly were wont to glow with health and vivacity. The expression of his countenance, too, she fancied was entirely altered ; the arched brow had declined into a half-frown ; there was an uneasy quickness in the glancing of his eyes, and in his movements, that she had never before observed ; the change was, alto-

gether, one which gave her great pain to witness. When Mr. Alwyn left him, he remained for a considerable time alone, with his back against the wall, his arms folded, and as though lost in thought ; then his eyes would run scowlingly over the gay throng moving before him, and once they seemed fixed on Lady Mary : they met hers, but it seemed that he did not notice the circumstance ; he gave no token of recognition, and shortly afterward withdrew.

Her ladyship was roused from her reverie by a voice close to her ear. It was that of Mr. Alwyn, who, leaning over the back of her chair, said, in a low tone, " My lady, excuse this apparent familiarity ; but I cannot endure the idea of suffering you to remain in unnecessary suspense and anxiety. I have *now* no reason for wishing Lord Draxfort to leave Melton : on the contrary, it is better that he should not come to town just at present."

“ You will tell me why to-morrow morning ?” asked Lady Mary.

“ I shall be proud to obey your ladyship’s commands in every particular,” replied Mr. Alwyn ; and without adding more, he moved on, and was soon lost amid the crowd.

Lady Mary returned home in low spirits, and exceedingly perplexed. Her prepossession in favour of Mr. Alwyn was such as, with all her native goodness of heart, she had seldom felt towards any one upon so short an acquaintance. The interest which he had displayed in the welfare of her nephew augured an innate benevolence of disposition, and he was evidently intimate with Lord Highfield. These were strong recommendations ; but there was another, the force of which Lady Mary did not probably notice at the moment. His manners were highly polished and respectful, without a tint of affectation or foppery, and, with the

advantages of a remarkably fine countenance and person, seldom failed to win for him the good opinion of those upon whom he had any design. His last brief communication wrought upon her ladyship's mind precisely as he had intended: instead of rendering her less anxious, it led her to guess at what could have caused his sudden change of opinion; and when she recollected his conversation with Lord Highfield, and that nobleman's singular conduct afterward, she found herself embarrassed with many painful surmises. Mr. Alwyn's allusion to his own experience, seemed to indicate that her nephew was exposed to the allurements of gambling; and it had been reported to her that Lord Highfield was not unfrequently in the habit of indulging himself in the practice of that fascinating and debasing vice. Could it be possible that he should have plunged into it so deeply as that his

once frank and manly mind could plot the ruin of another? She was determined not to admit the doubt, but, in spite of all her efforts, was unable to dismiss it entirely, for he *had entered* upon the downward career—he was, perhaps at that moment, treading the infatuating path of destruction. Alas! if such were his habits, it was no marvel that poor Lady Highfield wept when she was alone.

After passing an uneasy night, Lady Mary arose in the morning, and, arming herself with the talisman, waited impatiently the arrival of her new acquaintance. When he made his appearance, there was a natural glow of pleasure on her countenance; but scarcely had he taken a seat ere she found it difficult indeed to conceal her emotion, for the inward voice exclaimed, in a tone of triumphant self-congratulation —“ This is a devilish deal better than if Draxfort had introduced me in a cold, formal

manner, as he would have done — ay, and watched me pretty closely afterward, too. Here we are, tête-à-tête, at once. Her looks tell that first impressions are in my favour at any rate; so, master Davy, be upon the alert, and strike the iron while it is hot. Hallo! what means that change of countenance? Oh! I see: she is afraid she has shown her pleasure at seeing me too plainly. Maiden fears—that 's all. Modesty, delicacy, and all that infernal stuff! Don't be afraid, my lady, I'll not shock anything of the kind—not just at present, at least—can't answer for what may happen afterwards, though. What in the world is she thinking of, looking in the fire in that strange manner?—all in a tremor, too! If I was a novice, or she a widow, I should think she expected a declaration slap-dash. But no, that's not it—some odd whim I can't guess at now; but we shall know each other

better soon, and her whims and fancies must be odd indeed if I can't fall in with them."

These thoughts were yet passing in his mind while he addressed her ladyship in the most respectful manner, and expressed his regret at having let fall anything which might have made her uneasy on her nephew's account, when in reality there existed not the smallest cause for anxiety.

"Be candid with me on that subject," said Lady Mary, somewhat recovered from her disagreeable surprise; "it is better that I should be needlessly alarmed than plunged into a false security. You *must* have had some ground for what you said last night, as well as for your immediate change of opinion."

"Nothing more than to get a footing in your good graces," observed the talismanic voice; "the appearance of warm and disinterested friendship tells well with you ladies."

At the same time Mr. Alwyn replied, "I will be perfectly frank, my lady. There was a person at Melton in whose society Lord Draxfort took great pleasure, and with whom, during the long dull evenings, and on frosty and rainy days, he sometimes was led to play rather higher than his best friends could wish. I am happy to say that the individual I allude to has left Melton and is now in London."

"Little does she think," added the inward voice, "that the character described is now before her; but I hope her suspicions will fall on Highfield, and so neutralize anything that his white-livered lordship may venture to hint to her respecting me. I understand they were old acquaintances, if not something more; but let him take heed how he crosses my path here, or——" Here the talismanic communication broke off abruptly, as the thoughts which followed did not, perhaps, immediately concern her ladyship.

“ I ought to regret having so prematurely expressed my fears,” continued Mr. Alwyn. “ I entreat you to pardon me for having caused you a moment of unnecessary anxiety ; but I really cannot be such a hypocrite as to affirm that it is in my power to regret a circumstance which has procured for me the honour of your ladyship’s acquaintance, and, I flatter myself, likewise some small degree of confidence ; believe me, it will not be misplaced. I am some few years older, and have seen more of the world and of mankind, than my friend Lord Draxfort, who has many good points about him, but wants experience. The interest I feel in all that concerns him is excessive, and more than once I have had the gratification of frustrating some deep-laid schemes planned against him.”

Here the voice observed, “ Decoying the pigeon from other persons’ nets to catch

him in my own—that ought to tell. But what a face of stone the woman has!—not a muscle moves! not a sign of approbation! why she seems to have no heart—no feelings—a perfect statue! Thinking about her money and the price of stocks, I suppose—egad, I shall have a tough job of it! Let us try a little flattery.”

“Your ladyship,” continued Mr. Alwyn, “will easily conceive the pleasure that I experienced on such occasions; it was excessive, and I fancied could scarcely be surpassed in the career of friendship. But I was mistaken; that which I felt last night and still feel this morning is infinitely superior. The kind, amiable, and deep interest which you take in his welfare makes it appear to me as though a new sun had arisen above the horizon of my friend’s prospects—as though a guardian angel were commissioned to watch over his path.

Enviably indeed is his lot ! I sincerely hope he may in every respect prove worthy of it."

The talisman added, " If she has a spice of womankind in her composition, that ought to move her."

Lady Mary smiled faintly, and then, after a brief silence, said abruptly, " You are acquainted with Lord Highfield, sir. You have professed that you would be candid with me, and I mean to put you to the proof. Men have opportunities of knowing each other's characters and habits which we have not: I ask you in confidence, as the friend of my nephew, whether you know any reason why he should not be intimate with Lord Highfield?"

" It is a very delicate question to decide upon, my lady," said Mr. Alwyn, " and after all it can be but a matter of personal opinion; I hardly think myself qualified to judge. Your ladyship may recollect, perhaps, what I said

last night of my aptitude to frequently suspect without just cause, in consequence of my having been deceived by those in whom I placed implicit trust."

Here the talisman exclaimed, "Come, this is better! confidential, eh? Lord Highfield, eh?—curse the fellow! I thought I had my revenge already for what he won of me; but here is another opportunity!—I must fight shy at first, though, or it won't strike deep."

According to this resolution, Mr. Alwyn for some time parried her ladyship's question; but was at length induced to declare, with much seeming reluctance, that Lord Highfield was one among the number of those to whom he had lost considerable sums. "You will thus perceive," he continued, "that I am singularly and awkwardly placed when called upon to give an opinion of his lordship. I have no right to say that there was anything unfair in

the transaction to which I allude; but it is impossible for me to divest myself entirely of a certain feeling approaching to dislike against all who were concerned in causing the embarrassments which I for many years experienced. It is uncharitable, I know, and I strive to get the better of it; I forgive them with all my heart. The simple fact is, that I was young, rich, conceited, and thoughtless, and fell, as thousands mightier have fallen under the same circumstances. Perhaps, after all, if I were capable of judging my own case impartially, I should find that my losses were more owing to my own petulance and impetuosity than to the schemes of others."

The talisman added, "They like open and candid confessions generally. But what a woman it is! I seem to make no more impression upon her than if I was preaching a sermon! I thought too, last night, that she seemed to

have some feeling, and this morning, when I first came, there was no doubting the expression of her countenance. This stoicism must be assumed; and yet not a glance—not a smile indicative of satisfaction!—on the contrary, every now and then a pouting of the lip and a sinking of the brow, as though I had said something offensive. She's a confoundedly capricious, ill-tempered jade, I expect; but she's well worth a little trouble and study—a *tête-à-tête* with upwards of two hundred thousand pounds is no every-day affair."

"I am perfectly satisfied with what you have thought fit to tell me," said Lady Mary; "I shall ask no more questions concerning Lord Highfield. But, as it is now some years since I last saw my nephew, perhaps you will favour me with some general particulars of his character."

The talisman instantly exclaimed, "Your

ladyship has an ignorant, conceited, pig-headed fool for your heir, and I had almost as soon wish that you would pop off and leave him your fortune as take me for better or worse; for hang me if I don't think it would be easier to fleece him out of it than to unriddle your character."

"It is difficult, my lady," replied Mr. Alwyn, "very difficult to say what one thinks of a friend in a few words; but I have no doubt Lord Draxfort will become a very shining character. He is extremely well informed on many subjects, but his natural modesty prevents him from shining so much in society as his intimate friends might expect. With them, at least with myself, he is all ease, openness, and candour, though, perhaps, a little too diffident of the correctness of his own opinions and the strength of his judgment. His habits are precisely such as your ladyship must approve; he

seldom—I may say never follows any pleasure or pursuit to excess, yet enjoys them all.”

“ I will tell you plainly, sir, what I most dread,” said Lady Mary. “ For a young man of his rank in life, the greatest danger is to be apprehended from a propensity to gambling, or what is commonly called play. Have you observed anything of the sort in him? is he fond of any particular games?”

“ No, my lady,” replied Mr. Alwyn, “ certainly he is not fond of any in the sense in which you put the question. He sometimes joins in a quiet rubber among friends; but I don’t recollect ever to have heard him bet higher than a guinea, except with the person to whom I before alluded. I think he seems to enjoy a game at billiards, and now and then I have spent an hour or two with him in that way, merely for the sake of exercise; what we play for can hurt neither of us, though really

we are so equally matched, that if we played for thousands it would make little difference at the end of the season."

The talismanic voice, in the meanwhile, said, "Her inquisitive ladyship would be considerably shocked if she knew that her booby had fitted me out for this expedition, tilbury and all, and pretty nearly cleared my hunting expenses. There's no danger of his telling her what I won of him when we were alone, for the conceited fool still thinks himself the best player, and I always let him get a few games in public. He'll boast to her of his winnings, very likely, as usual, but his pride will keep the rest in the back-ground. But what an extraordinary being she is! — hang me if she doesn't look like a fury! Of all the capricious vixens I ever saw, she is the most incomprehensible; here have I been more than half an hour, trying flattery and playing the

amiable, without obtaining a single decently encouraging look. I see there'll be no living with her, that's plain enough. All the better -- this house is large enough for two. Egad, there's a smile at last !”

Here Mr. Alwyn said: “ Your ladyship smiles at the idea of our playing for thousands, and neither winning nor losing ; certainly, it is a superlatively ridiculous way of elucidating a point, but really, though I am older, and consequently have had more experience and practice in the game than Lord Draxfort, and even used to consider myself a good player, his eye and his judgment are so correct, that I am obliged to exert myself to the very uttermost.”

Lady Mary found it extremely difficult to refrain from expressing her indignation ; but a little reflection told her that it would be more politic to let him believe that she was his dupe, as an immediate breach might deprive her of

future opportunities of serving her nephew. Accordingly, with as much complacency as she could possibly assume, she said—

“Your account, sir, of his lordship is such that I feel very anxious to see him. Did he talk of coming to town?”

“Egad!” exclaimed the talisman, “that will do! He’s very nearly cleaned out just now, I know, and if I can persuade aunty to send him some money, it will be devilish convenient, as I foresee a long siege, and it won’t do for me to frequent the clubs, or she’ll hear of it. Simon Pure is the part I must play, and in London it is easy enough to find some corner to give young numbskull his revenge, as he calls it, snugly by ourselves.”

The thinker, while this was passing in his mind, replied: “My lady, I have, in all that has been said, spoken without the least reserve. The kind interest which you take in everything

that concerns my young friend does you honour, and I must candidly say, the effect it has had on me is such that I know not how to conceal anything from you. I have reason to believe that his lordship's absence from town is not so much a matter of choice as of prudence, excessively praiseworthy at his time of life. I know that his tenantry have been somewhat backward in paying their rents, and that during the last year he was obliged to incur very considerable expense in building and necessary repairs. I need not tell your ladyship that a winter in town for a person of his rank, is not exactly an affair compatible with strict economy. This, your ladyship will observe, is communicated to you most confidentially, for he has never told me, nor even hinted, that such were his reasons for remaining at Melton with a small establishment; I gather it only from what I may call 'circumstantial evidence,' and

the reports of some gentlemen residing in his neighbourhood. My principal reason for mentioning it now is, that you may justly appreciate the cause of his absence at a time when it might possibly appear scarcely consistent with the respect which he owes, and which, I am persuaded, he feels towards your ladyship."

"It won't do to go any farther," added the talisman, "or she'll begin to fancy he has been gambling. She looks deuced suspicious already. Plague take her! she's the queerest animal I ever set about pleasing in the whole course of my life. They told me she was called 'the merry old maid.' Merry indeed! There! that's the second thing like a smile that I've seen about her this morning, and why it's there now the Lord knows. I'm half inclined to think she's a fool, and yet she talked sensibly enough last night; perhaps she's one of those 'maids who love the moon,' and whose

—— ‘ heart and looks

At noon are cold as winter brooks.’

She is in no melting mood now, that is certain. Well, she is not the first whose confidence I have been obliged to win by degrees, and it is something to have got upon a footing of familiarity in so short a time.”

What has been related formed but a very small part of the communications rapidly delivered by the talisman to Lady Mary. There were rough sketches of various embryo schemes to be carried into execution with the assistance of her fortune; and even the room in which they were sitting was mentally appropriated to certain nocturnal orgies, connected with plans for the ruin of individuals, whose names, to her regret, were not pronounced. All was base, sordid, unfeeling, and selfish. It was the first time that the heart of a gamester had been opened to her; and as she looked at her visiter, and beheld his fine, manly countenance, and

witnessed the warmth and apparent sincerity with which he spoke of his friend, while the inward voice ever arose, giving the lie to every word, her heart sickened within her. At length her emotion became so evident that Mr. Alwyn expressed his fears that her ladyship was unwell. As it would spare her the humiliation of a formal and friendly leave-taking, she instantly availed herself of the plea, and acknowledged that she was suffering. He expressed his concern with almost a lover's depth of feeling. Rachel was summoned, and on her appearance he respectfully withdrew, blaming himself for not having observed her ladyship's indisposition, and fearing that he might have caused it by inadvertently drawing her into a long conversation. Such was the tenor of the words he uttered; but the last given by the talisman, as he left the room, were: "Ill health! I didn't know that before: another recommendation!"

CHAPTER VII.

LADY MARY was one morning visiting an acquaintance in Piccadilly, when Lord Highfield was announced. She was sitting with several other ladies looking over some new purchases of drawings and prints, which were spread upon the table before them. Since she had observed his conversation with Mr. Alwyn, and his singular bearing afterward, more than a week had elapsed, during which she frequently felt surprised, and perhaps a little mortified, that he had not favoured her with a call, as, whether he had observed her or not,

her being in town could not possibly be unknown to him. On the present occasion the drawing-room was large, the company present were divided into several small parties, and he entered at the end of the room farthest from that in which she was engaged. The talisman was at its post, but she listened in vain to catch the tones of his voice. It was evident that he was not thinking of her. But the titled and wealthy heiress was not a person to be allowed to remain in the back-ground, as she might have done formerly, and the lady of the mansion acquainted his lordship that she was present. The talisman instantly exclaimed—

“ If I had known she was here, I certainly would not have come up stairs, but now there is no escape ; I *must* speak to her.”

These ungracious words were uttered in a tone which rendered them less offensive than perplexing. It seemed as though the speaker

was suffering. The oral reply which he made to the lady of the house was inaudible; but in a few minutes he left her and moved towards the table, where Lady Mary appeared to be so entirely lost in contemplating a beautiful engraving as not to observe his approach; she was in truth listening to the words of her talisman, and felt grateful that she had some excuse for not looking up till she should be able to stifle her emotion. The tones were now plaintive; a sigh first arose, and then the voice continued:—

“How little has time changed *her*! Oh, how happy we might have been! She is the only woman I ever really loved! But, money—money—the cursed infatuation and desire for riches, led me to shun the only path that would have conducted me to real happiness! And what has been the result? I have been the prey of——” Here there was a pause for

a few seconds, after which the voice continued, with occasional interruptions :—" A large fortune too, for the sake of which I sacrificed the fondest dreams, the cherished wishes of youth, would not have been wanting ; and it would have come at a period of life when we had learned to use it properly. Dare I say so much of myself, being what I am ? Yes ; had she been mine, my companion, my friend, my guide, my counsellor, far, far differently would my days have been spent ; our children perhaps by this time — Ah ! that thought is insupportable. I should not now be driven from my own house to seek pleasure ; — pleasure, indeed ! is that the name for——. Ah ! with her — with her our fireside might now, indeed, have been a terrestrial paradise !"

Here the thinker, as if unwilling to interrupt the amusement of the ladies, took up a highly-finished engraving of the Garden of Eden.

The voice again arose, "Little does she think how I have been punished! Her mind has retained all its native purity; she finds enjoyment in all that passes before her, while I, the prey of—— *She* would not have received me with upbraidings; no, no, she would have had no cause—bound by the ties of affection, instead of the icy bonds of interest, I could not then have erred. But the door opens, some one is coming; I must not be seen so near her. Base, miserable slave that I am, to be thus reduced, watched, suspected, while my heart yearns towards her to render her service!"

"Lord Highfield lost in contemplating the Garden of Eden!" exclaimed one of the ladies. "Well, for my part, I confess I never could envy either of those two poor solitary beings, picking fruit off trees, and living in an eternal *tête-à-tête* for I don't know how many hundred years. Darby and Joan, in the country,

now-a-days, are far better off, for they do go to market sometimes, and now and then see a neighbour. It must have been very *triste*; but I suppose they got up lovers' quarrels occasionally, by way of variety. How the ancient couple would stare if they could be brought to London, and taken to the Opera or Almack's! how delightful it would be to see their surprise!"

"I fear they would scarcely recognise their descendants," observed Lord Highfield, in answer to this ridiculous speech. And then, turning to Lady Mary, who felt obliged to look up at the mention of his name, he expressed, in a very common-place way, the pleasure he had in seeing her in good health and looking so well. The talisman added, "I dare not show any extraordinary interest; she may think me heartless, forgetful, envious perhaps—it must be so, at least for the present."

“ I imagined you had forgotten an old acquaintance,” said Lady Mary, with assumed gaiety ; “ I do not recollect seeing your lordship’s card since I came to town.”

Lord Highfield said something of his being in London merely for a few days, on his way into Devonshire, and that he had been unexpectedly detained on business. “ Business,” added the talisman, “ which, I trust, she little guesses the nature of. But I must be gone ; the risk of remaining in conversation with her is too great ; the next moment may be the crisis.” Here his lordship pleaded an engagement with his lawyer, and took leave somewhat abruptly.

About ten minutes after his departure, as Lady Mary sate ostensibly occupied with the drawings and prints, but in reality musing on what had been revealed to her, she was roused by the talismanic voice adopting that of Mr. Alwyn.

“ Ah ! there she sits ! I saw it in his countenance as he walked past and affected not to see me. The paltry scoundrel would not come in his carriage, lest it should be seen at the door ; and he promised not to call upon her forsooth, but he can seek her elsewhere. This is the secret of her not being at home day after day when I have called ; but I will make sure that he has spoken to her, and then——”

Since her memorable interview with the thinker, Lady Mary had several times been in society where he was present, and on each occasion she had endeavoured to conduct herself towards him as much as possible in her wonted manner with other indifferent acquaintances. She had even, though with some repugnance, gone so far as to express regret that she happened to be out when he called ; but of course had never again invited him to a particular and friendly conference. The talisman

told her that this conduct on her part had excited a suspicion in the mind of the gambler that some one had been representing his character to her in its true colours; but when it came to the names of the parties suspected, the voice had always stopped without pronouncing them. It now, however, appeared clearly that Lord Highfield was one of those persons, and what had just passed in his breast showed that he was aware of it, but why or what he had to fear on that account remained a secret; and Lady Mary, like other possessors of extraordinary power, felt dissatisfied with it because it was not more extensive.

Mr. Alwyn very soon joined the group in which she was; he appeared to be in excessively high spirits, and created general mirth by his whimsical remarks on the various objects which covered the table. The ease and levity of his manners contrasted strongly with the

words of the talisman, which spake at intervals in the deep tone assumed by assassins and conspirators on the stage. "I will pay her no particular attention; let us see if neglect will not pique her. She's as dull as usual—hang her! she's a riddle. Everybody says she used to be merry before her change of fortune; such, then, must be her natural disposition. Yet here she sits, in the midst of a laughing circle, as dull as if hunted by duns; it must either be affectation or—— Let us see what effect the sudden mention of a certain name will have upon her; if the fellow has been blabbing to her about me, it will tell."

Here Mr. Alwyn took up a landscape and exclaimed, "That is Lord Highfield's place in Nottinghamshire!"

"No," replied a lady; "that is a view taken in Derbyshire."

"The resemblance cannot be very strong,"

observed her neighbour; "if it had, it must have struck his lordship, who was here only a few minutes since."

"Perhaps he didn't notice it," said Mr. Alwyn, carelessly; "indeed, I wonder how he could find time this morning to look at anything so frivolous as drawings of any kind, for when I passed him just now in the street, he was hurrying along, with a business-like face, as if he had all the cares of the world upon him, or like a tailor going to take measure of a new customer."

"Or like an old customer getting out of the tailor's way," added Lady Mary, laughing, but scarcely looking up, for the talisman told her that she was closely watched.

"Yes," said the lady who had so kindly commiserated the situation of our first parents, "his lordship seemed in great haste, really too much so to be very remarkably amiable. I

believe the Garden of Eden and Lady Mary occupied the whole of his attention while he was here."

"Lady Mary and the Garden of Eden!" murmured the inward voice, in a tone that made her ladyship shudder: "Aha! my lady," it continued, "I've caught your secret at last! You stood the first mention of his name pretty well, too; but that change of countenance and the tremor of that hand speak too plainly. What! a married man?—This is your delicate, refined morality! your anxiety about your nephew—your natural heir, as you styled him!—No, no, that smile and affected indifference come too late. This discovery may be worth something: if I can but gain her hand, what care I about her heart or her person either? Really it would be a most convenient match for both parties; no jealousy—different tastes—Newmarket and Eden, ha! ha!"

Even while these thoughts were passing in his mind, Mr. Alwyn replied, "It must be confessed that his lordship's choice of subjects for admiration is most exquisite; the Garden of Eden, with such an Eve as her ladyship, or any one of the present company, must indeed have been a delightful place. Do let me look at it! yes, there they are, just visible in their sequestered bower, surrounded by a whole menagerie of very grim-looking, but doubtless very amiable quadrupeds, et cætera. I suppose that stiff little nag is Adam's favourite hack, as he is not long-reached enough for a hunter."

"Give me the print directly," exclaimed a vivacious young lady, "you shall not look at it any longer; I declare you talk quite profanely! You know very well that there was no hunting in those days."

"Heigho! so much the worse for poor Adam," said Mr. Alwyn. "But come now,

let us be a little sentimental, and talk rationally. Don't be offended, but pray tell me, frankly and honestly, do you think Eve could be perfectly contented with only one admirer?"

"Certainly," replied the thoughtless young lady, quickly — "to be sure, when he was her husband and the man of her choice."

"Pick and choose out of one," observed Mr. Alwyn, laughing with boy-like glee, "that is excellent! But I apprehend you fair damsels of modern days would not be exceedingly gratified by the offer of so splendid a selection."

"If all men were like Adam," said the young lady, a little confused, "perhaps we might."

"No," replied Mr. Alwyn; "the love of admiration is natural to the sex. I do not say it is a fault or a failing, far from it; what would the most perfect female be in society if

she strove to please but one? say even that he was the real, sole object of her choice. But as for that, not one man and woman in ten thousand are so situated; marriages are usually the result of the advice of friends, prudence, the desire of settling, or of liberty."

"Of liberty!" exclaimed a lady.

"Yes, of liberty," replied Mr. Alwyn, apparently excited with the subject. "A single lady can scarcely be intimate with a male friend without being the topic of busy gossiping; must not be seen alone in public — can neither walk, ride, nor even visit, unless under the 'protection,' as it is called, of some one who is probably an insufferable bore; whereas, once married, unless united to a jealous fool, she is perfect mistress of her own actions. Perhaps this is in a great measure our fault, but we are all the children of habit, and cannot get the better of existing prejudices. For my own

part, I confess, that if I were endeavouring to win, or even supposing I had gained the affections of a lady, I should not like to see her *very* intimate with any other gentleman, because it might make me doubt of eventual success, but, after we were married, nothing would afford me greater pleasure than to see that she took delight in the company of my friends, and chose others of her own, male or female, without consulting me; in short, she would be perfectly *at liberty*, as I said before, for I have no idea of *half*-confidence, and have not a spark of jealousy in my whole composition."

"I don't think I should like a husband at all the better for that," said one of the ladies. "I remember reading somewhere that jealousy was a certain proof of affection."

"No doubt," replied Mr. Alwyn: "take Shakspeare's 'Othello' as a specimen. It may

even be tolerated in private life, when all other proof is wanting, but otherwise it is never necessary, and *always* somewhat more than inconvenient to both parties; to say nothing worse, it makes them ridiculous, and that, according to the spirit of the times, is far from being an enviable distinction. ‘No, i’faith, I’ll none of it!’ Give me perfect confidence!”

“That will do for the present,” said the talisman; “it won’t do *here* to defend Italian customs, I shall find an opportunity for that when she supposes herself unobserved; not that I can really flatter myself with any very sanguine hopes, but drops of water, continually falling, wear holes in stone. Positively, I have set myself such a task; she is more like stone than flesh and blood. But *such* a fortune! Zounds! And then, the splendid start I made! I’d have backed myself against the field. If I did but know exactly what degree of interest

she feels toward Highfield—Yes; that might do! Generosity tells well. But how can I, when she is never at home? I must think of this. We must have plot and counterplot, and play a deep game, for it is well worth trying hard for.”

Such were the gamester's thoughts, while, abruptly quitting the subject of jealousy as too dry and serious, he continued to chatter with much fluency and perfect apparent thoughtlessness, on the trivial topics of the day.

“I will admit him,” thought Lady Mary. “He now connects Lord Highfield's name so much with mine that I shall probably learn what his lordship has to fear.”

Shortly after she had come to this decision Mr. Alwyn had the honour of handing her to her carriage, and took the opportunity of expressing his regret that he had always called during her ladyship's absence.

“ You should come earlier,” observed Lady Mary gaily ; “ I have really so many visits to pay myself that they occupy the whole of the morning.”

“ Ah ! that sounds well !” exclaimed the talisman. “ Let me once get upon a familiar footing, and she is not a woman if Harry Alwyn will not make his way.”

“ Your ladyship is most condescending,” said he ; “ I will avail myself of your permission to-morrow morning, as I hope in the mean while to receive a letter from Lord Draxfort.”

“ Oh ! you are a dear little gift !” exclaimed Lady Mary, apostrophising the talisman, as her carriage drove off. “ It shall be ‘ plot and counterplot.’ You will guide me aright, and enable me to rescue the only man for whom I ever——” Here she could not express her thoughts, for they crowded too tumultuously

upon her. She fell into a reverie, during which past scenes, some previously almost forgotten, flashed vividly upon her recollection, and all bore strong evidence of the truth of what had been revealed to her that morning. It was a wild mingling of pain and pleasure that she experienced, but was too fascinating to be abandoned, and therefore, on her arrival at home, she retired to her boudoir to enjoy the luxury of silent reflection. Had Lord Highfield spoken what the talisman had uttered, or could she have listened to such a declaration, she felt that both would have been degraded, but now she had become possessed of his secret in a manner perfectly innocent. His conduct had been the same as that of thousands of young persons under similar circumstances. Dazzled by the glitter of wealth, or perhaps compelled by a sense of filial duty, he had quitted the path in which alone he felt certain

of finding happiness, to tread that which still promised fairly. It seemed that he had been disappointed, and she sincerely pitied him. The approximation of such a feeling to others of a warmer nature has often been repeated. Her imagination wandered from the memory of the past to visionary dreams of what might have been had they contentedly retired for a few years on their comparatively humble means, or had fortune earlier interfered in her favour. There might be weakness in indulging such fancies, but there could be nothing wrong, so she gave herself up to their guidance, and was wafted away amid the ideal creations of her almost unconscious spirit.

Few minds are purer than was that of Lady Mary; but who can control the wanderings of imagination? She was suddenly aroused from her trance-like enjoyment. Her mind had indeed wandered from the past and what might

have been ; it had strayed onward into the future, which fancy was busily engaged in painting with brilliant colours, when she started from her seat, pressed her hand upon her forehead, and exclaimed : “ Is it possible that I can harbour such thoughts ! ” She was shocked at herself. The recollection of Lady Highfield’s ill health had crept unperceived into the midst of her musings, and, suffice it to say, a charitable wish for her recovery was not that which alarmed Lady Mary.

If the momentary admission of improper thoughts or hopes be a flaw in her character, let it be remembered that she had just learned how much she had been and still was beloved by the person to whom alone she could make a return of affection.

“ It is the knowledge of his secret thoughts that has led me to this,” she murmured ; “ better were it that I had remained in ignorance !

I fear—I fear this power may not be for good. Whence it comes, or how it was obtained by its first possessor, I know not. It rendered Mr. Yerraway miserable;—it has not made me happy. I wish I had refused it; and yet, if properly made use of, it may enable me to render important services—to warn the unwary—to thwart the schemes of the designer.”

Her ladyship had yet to learn how difficult, and perhaps impossible, it is for human beings to make proper use of superhuman knowledge or power. It is well that such gifts are not common among mortals, as they would be like fire or sharp-edged tools in the hands of children, dangerous and destructive to themselves and others. It is painful and even humiliating to reflect how often extraordinary *natural* gifts are wasted or misapplied; how frequently genius and splendid talents take the lead in the

headlong career of vice, cheered by the clamorous applause of admiring ignorance and folly. Fearful, then, would be the possession of any supernatural gift among us inferior beings, enveloped in the clouds of prejudice, stimulated by our mortal passions, and surrounded by temptation ! It can be no marvel that, in their day, sorcerers and necromancers were looked upon with superstitious dread and abhorrence. Some such reflections pressed, rather unpleasantly, on Lady Mary.

“ If the world knew of my secret,” thought she, “ I should be universally shunned ; what friend even would submit to the presence of a mental spy ? How often have I heard breathings which I rashly concluded to proceed from an envious heart, and afterwards discovered that that heart harboured nothing but kindness and goodwill toward me ! The whisper revealed to me was but a passing, thoughtless

wish to be as fortunate as I am, and not to deprive me of anything I possessed. Yes, I have often been misled; I have occasionally been uncharitable. I think I may say that I was not formerly wont to be so. And this secret of another's breast which I have learnt this morning, what strange dreams has it conducted me to! No; the talisman is a dangerous possession: I will endeavour to use it well while I retain it, but it shall be returned to its former owner as soon as Lord Highfield is released from his difficulties, and I have had one interview with my nephew."

Here she was interrupted by a well-known tap at the door. "Come in, Rachel," she said; and as her handmaiden entered, the talisman murmured,

"I do think, as far as I can learn, she's been sitting pretty nigh an hour moping by herself; it didn't use to be so when we lived in

lodgings. I almost wish she was poor again; but I think I've got something to tell her that she'll be pleased with."

Here Rachel began, in her own way, to tell a somewhat roundabout story, beginning with the items of sundry articles which she wanted to purchase for the house and for herself. She then stated that she had been recommended to buy them in the city, and therefore visited Ludgate Hill and Fleet Street, and thence came into the Strand, where she was walking along very quietly, now and then stopping to look in at the shop windows, when all of a sudden she was laid hold of by a very handsome young gentleman, who called her by her name, and inquired after her mistress. "I couldn't think who he was," she continued, "so I asked him; and, instead of answering, he burst out a laughing, and said, 'What! don't you know me?' 'No,' says I, 'I don't;,' and I couldn't

tell what to make of it. I thought it was some one as wanted to make fun of me; so I said, 'If you know my lady, sir, you'd best call on her all in the reg'lar way, and leave your card, and not stop folks in the street, for I've got no time to spare gossiping, I can tell you that.' Well—I shall never forget it—what do you think he did?"

"I am sure I can't guess," replied Lady Mary, smiling.

"Well, my lady, I'll tell you," continued Rachel; "he cried out, 'What! is my aunt in town, then?' 'Your aunt!' says I; and then I looked at him again, and for all that he is so altered, I knew him again directly—it was Master George, that we haven't seen so long, never since he went away to sea, and was quite a boy. Oh, I was so glad! it was as much as ever I could do not to begin kissing him, as I used to do when he was a little fellow—La, how

I used to love him ! Well, he's just the same, only a great deal bigger, and a good deal sun-burnt, which I like all the better in a man. So I told him you were very rich now, and what do you think he said, my lady ? — I shall never forget it ! You won't be offended I know, so I'll tell you. He said, ' Rich or poor, no matter for that. Tell the old girl I'll come and see her to-morrow ; and mind, if she asks me to dine, try if you can't knock up one of your old sort of Yorkshire puddings.' He said he'd have come home directly with me, only he was obliged to dine with his captain, and had not a moment to spare, and couldn't come early to-morrow, because he has got to go to Somerset House about a lieutenant, I think he said. La, I'm as glad as if anybody had given me I don't know what ! He was always a favourite of mine ; he was so ——”

Here she checked herself, and the talisman added, "So different from all the rest of the family; but I don't mean you, my lady, *exactly*."

CHAPTER VIII.

ON the following morning Lady Mary was surprised by an early visit from her nephew Lord Draxfort. His lordship had been informed that his friend Alwyn had become acquainted with her, and called frequently in Cavendish Square. This was rather alarming intelligence for her heir expectant, as he knew enough of Mr. Alwyn to calculate that he was not likely to be very particular in his attentions to any one, unless with some interested motive. A journey to London was the immediate consequence.

Lady Mary entered the room in which he was sitting by a side-door concealed from his view by a skreen, and no sooner had she passed the threshold than the talismanic voice exclaimed, "She has no idea of hoarding her money, I see; the furniture of this house must have cost her an immense sum! Traps to catch a husband, I suppose. Your old maids are never safe till they're under ground."

Here her ladyship turned the corner of the skreen, and her nephew rushed forward, and expressed, with much apparent warmth, his delight at seeing her look so well. At the same time the inward voice continued, "A confounded deal too well! I wish she was in a consumption; but there's no chance of that, I'm afraid. Hang her! she's not so very much older than I am, and not so very ill-looking neither. It is a pity that there is a law against marrying one's aunt, or hang me

if I wouldn't have her myself; such a fortune might make one put up with one's grandmother!"

"My dear aunt," said his lordship, "I beg now to repeat, in person, what I wrote to you some time since: I do sincerely congratulate you on your accession of fortune. I have very often previously thought of your straitened circumstances, and indeed had made arrangements for increasing your annuity in a year or two; but ever since I came to the title I assure you it has been quite as much as I could do to support it decently. To tell you the truth, it would not very well have suited me to have spent the winter in town; and as it is, I must make only a flying visit, as I've let the house in Park Lane for the season."

"So I understood," observed Lady Mary, "and I trust you will pardon my frankness in saying, that I am sorry for it; neither my

father nor yours would have approved of such a step."

"Confound her impudence!" exclaimed the talisman, "I suppose she thinks her money gives her the right to lecture me."

His lordship replied, that the offer made to him was too tempting to be resisted under the circumstances in which he found himself at the moment. The talisman added :—

"I suppose she'd be outrageous if she knew that I pitted the use of the house and furniture against a thousand, and all but won it. If she has any generosity about her, she will offer me apartments here during my stay."

Such had been her ladyship's intention, but what she had already heard caused her to hesitate.

"What is she biting her lips about, I wonder?" continued the inward voice; "I suppose she is thinking whether she shall offer me any

money. It won't do to ask her at our first interview, but before I leave town I'll get something out of her if possible. It's evident she has got her share of family pride, or she wouldn't think so much about my letting the house: that must be my cue; and I'll get up some tale to mortify her, though, if she knew exactly how things stand with me just now, there would be quite enough perhaps, without any invention. By heavens! I can hardly endure the thought that she, an old maid, who was nobody yesterday, should be rolling in wealth, and not knowing what to do with it, while I, the head of the family, to whom it ought by right to belong, am hampered and pestered by duns. How she contrived to curry favour with the old East Indian I can't conceive; my father too, must have been a confounded——"

Here occurred one of those frequent pauses

by which the talisman gave its possessor to understand that she was not the subject of the thinker's thoughts. Enough, however, had been revealed to convince her that the memory of her brother was not held in very high respect by the present "head of the family;" and as for what concerned herself, she felt it not so much at the moment as afterwards, when she reflected that such was really the station which he filled in society.

"I know something of the family property," said her ladyship, "and feel some degree of surprise, as well as much regret, that you should have found yourself under the necessity of not only curtailing your expenses, but of augmenting your income in such a singular manner. I have not visited at the house, though Mrs. Hazard called upon me; I merely left a card, for I could not bear the idea of seeing the old family paintings, and various

articles of substantial furniture, so familiar to me from my childhood, and awakening so many recollections, in the possession of strangers."

"My dear aunt!" exclaimed Lord Draxfort, "if I had imagined that it would have hurt your feelings, I certainly would not have let the house on any consideration; but after all, what can it signify? In a few months it will be in my own hands again, not a penny the worse, for, before I came to terms, I made particular inquiry into the habits of my tenant, and have every reason to be satisfied."

"Your lordship has displayed a talent for finance in your arrangement for the rent," observed Lady Mary: "I understand that it was paid beforehand; that, no doubt, was the great inducement, and must have relieved you from any little pecuniary embarrassments that you were under at the moment."

"Surely Hazard has not been bragging!"

exclaimed the talisman ; “ he gave me his word of honour that the affair should be kept a profound secret. But his wife has called here, it seems ; that looks suspicious : when women get together, all comes out, they say ; if so, the purse-proud minx is quizzing me ; but I ’ll be on my guard with her, and have no confessious till I ’ve seen Hazard, and ——”

“ My dear aunt,” replied his lordship, “ on your account only I regret having let the house. Certainly, I have been obliged to attend a little to what you term finance, as my father left a great many debts and incumbrances on the estate ; but I trust, after a few years I shall be able to get all clear. But really I don’t see why I should annoy you with my affairs. Is there anything that I can do for you ? if so, pray consider me entirely at your disposal ; it will give me infinite pleasure to be of service to you, I assure you.”

“ I am not aware of anything likely to require your lordship's assistance,” said Lady Mary coldly ; for, besides the difference between his words and thoughts, her nephew expressed himself, perhaps from habit, with a patronizing air which was somewhat offensive to her under existing circumstances.

“ This fortune has made her as proud as Lucifer !” exclaimed the talisman. “ Some months ago she would have been thankful for any particular notice I might have taken of her ; egad ! that was the time, if I could but have known what would happen. Well, I must keep her in good humour, if possible, though hang me if I know how, for I 'm tired of her company already. What a bore an aunt is !” At the same time his lordship repeated the delight he should experience if he could in any way be of service to his dear aunt, and added a hope that she would pay the old Hall

a visit in the summer. “ You shall have it all your own way,” he continued ; “ do just as you please, and consider yourself as the mistress of the place as long as you choose to stay. I was thinking of some modern alterations in the grounds, but I shall not suffer anything to be done till your arrival, for I don’t profess to understand such matters, and I know your ladyship has a most exquisite taste. For instance, that sweet little cottage in the home park, that still goes by your name ; the beautiful simplicity of the plan, and the charming situation you chose for it, excite the admiration of every one.”

Now, as the said rustic edifice had been the scene of many of Lady Mary’s earlier pleasures ; the very mention of it awakened a multitude of bygone recollections. It had been the refuge of her solitary hours, and there she had, in the wild gaiety and joy of youth, con-

ducted her chosen friends and companions. She had selected the spot and watched the progress of the building; many of the shrubs with which it was environed were planted by her own hands, and all under her direction. It had been what is commonly termed her "hobby," and she was not a little proud of it: consequently, when her nephew spake in such flattering terms, her eyes glistened, and she was deciding that such respect for her favourite retreat might compensate for a multitude of faults, when the talisman exclaimed —

“Egad! it’s a good thing I took Smith’s advice, and let him make a tool-house of it instead of pulling it down. Of all the tasteless, senseless things I ever saw, Lady Mary’s Folly is the most ridiculous. We must have that name changed before she comes down. I see the bait takes. But what now? she looks as black as thunder all of a sudden; one would

think she saw the cottage full of tools and rubbish, with an old sow and a litter of pigs in one corner: that is about the present state of things, I guess; — but your ladyship may depend upon having all set in visitable order, out of due respect to the founder's money."

Lady Mary sighed, and informed his lordship that she had not yet made her arrangements for the summer, and could not enter into any positive engagement at present.

"Consult your own convenience entirely, my lady," said he; "but depend upon it, I shall suffer nothing to be done till you favour me with your opinions."

"Keep your word respecting the cottage in that particular," rejoined Lady Mary, forgetting herself at the moment.

"Confusion!" exclaimed the talisman; "is it possible she can know its present condition? Yes; she's been gossiping with the servants;

that cursed old woman of hers, that used to live with her at Draxfort, corresponds with some of my people, I've no doubt."

"Most assuredly I will, my dear aunt," said his lordship, "but I hope you won't think of making any alteration *there*; I don't think I *could* consent to that; it is such a charming object at a distance! I have not been *into* it since last spring, as I was travelling in the autumn, but I have no doubt that it is kept in excellent order, as I was *very* particular in giving instructions to that effect."

The subject was then dropped, and they talked on indifferent matters till Mr. Alwyn was announced.

"Confound the fellow!" exclaimed the talisman; "call upon her and gain admittance at this early hour! He has made good use of his time."

"I used to meet a gentleman of that name at Melton," observed Lord Draxfort, vacantly.

“It is the same,” said Lady Mary; “I made his acquaintance in consequence of understanding that he was your particular friend.”

“The scoundrel!” cried the talisman; “so he has made me the stepping-stone to gain an introduction to her.”

Here Mr. Alwyn entered, and the inward monitor, assuming the tone of his voice, exclaimed—

“Draxfort here! by all that’s unlucky! Curse the fool! I wish he had broken his neck. He’s just got brains and love of money enough to be afraid of any one’s paying attention to his aunt.”

Scarcely were these words uttered ere Mr. Alwyn, having respectfully saluted her ladyship, sprang towards his friend, and with well-dissembled joy, expressed his surprise and gratification at their unexpected meeting.

“It was only yesterday,” he continued, “that I was telling Lady Mary I expected

a letter from you this morning." Here his lordship's brow became overcast. Mr. Alwyn enjoyed the sight, and proceeded : — " Indeed, it was to have your news that her ladyship gave me permission to call, for whenever I have had the pleasure of a few minutes conversation with her, which has been *very* seldom, your lordship has formed the sole engrossing topic."

" I have told some tolerable round lies about your abilities and good qualities," said the talisman, " but I'm not afraid of the consequences, for she is no fool, and will soon find out what you really are, and set down my account of you to the blindness of friendship. What an ass the fellow is ! I do believe by his frowning that he thought I was going to ask him before his aunt for the odd hundred he promised to send by the post."

What followed between the two friends was

rendered extremely perplexing to Lady Mary by the frequent pauses of the talismanic voice. From what she learned, it seemed, Mr. Alwyn took it for granted that his lordship, having let his own house, would remain under the roof where they were, and thus afford him opportunities of calling frequently ; he therefore resolved not to risk awakening the nephew's suspicions by any marked attention to the aunt in his presence, and at one of the pauses her ladyship fancied she descried an intention of letting him win back some of his losings, in order to keep him in good humour.

His lordship did not often think of her, but when he did it was solely with reference to her property :—

“ It ought to have been mine, by rights,” said the talisman in his voice : “ it is very hard that an old maid should have it, when I am the head of the family. What 's the use of it to

her? I hope she won't live long, at any rate, as it must come to me after her death; that is, if she doesn't marry. Ay, there's the rub! I'll look sharp after her, however. As for Alwyn, I've been told that his father, or grandfather, or some one of his relations, was a tailor; when she hears that, it will settle *his* business."

At length Lord Highfield was spoken of, and it was well for her ladyship that she received internal warning that he was about to become the topic of conversation, as his name was introduced in a manner well calculated to try what degree of interest she felt for his lordship.

"Talking of Melton, and the people there," said Mr. Alwyn, "that reminds me of something I heard last night; I hope it is not all true; but if there be any foundation for half that is said, it is quite enough to account for

the change in the poor fellow's manner and appearance. Your ladyship, doubtless, recollects what was remarked yesterday about Lord Highfield seeming to have all the cares of the world upon him. Well, report says, he is a ruined man."

The preparation which Lady Mary had received prevented her from believing this report to its full extent, and consequently she replied, with just as much emotion as suited her words—

"I sincerely hope the report is false, for I have known his lordship many years, and feel a high respect for him. What can he have been doing to injure his fortune?"

"Oh, my lady," answered Mr. Alwyn, "it is the old story: those infatuating cards and dice. When a man once begins to be fond of them, whatever may be his resolution and good sense on other points, they soon become a necessity; he can't exist without them. I

knew by report, for I never trust myself in such places, that his lordship was in the habit of frequenting a club-house not far from St. James's Street, and took the liberty of warning him against certain individuals who are constantly to be found there. It is a thankless office, that of giving advice. I am afraid he judged of others by himself; and, from what I know of him, I should think him just the amiable, good-natured, unsuspecting person likely to be made a dupe of. Oh! that hateful feeling, suspicion! the necessity of being upon one's guard when with those who style themselves friends is the most painful truth impressed upon us by experience—it is so repugnant to one's nature! For my own part, I am resolved never to associate intimately with any person in whom I cannot place the most implicit confidence: I firmly believe Lord Highfield to be worthy of the utmost, and, such being my

opinion of him, I feel much more than I can express on the present occasion."

"Perhaps it isn't so bad as they represent it," said Lord Draxfort; "reports of that kind always grow, like snowballs, by rolling. They got hold of it at Melton that you and I played at billiards for hundreds, when, you know, we never played above guineas, and once or twice five pound matches." As the hopeful nephew said this, he contrived to get behind his aunt, and winked significantly at the person whom he addressed.

"Yes," observed Mr. Alwyn, carelessly, "I was telling her ladyship the other day that we sometimes amused ourselves in that way for the sake of exercise in unfavourable weather: it is an agreeable relaxation when one is tired of reading. The only danger of that game is in public, where lookers-on are excited to bet upon the players; but we avoided that by

having the room to ourselves; and as for our stakes—I was trying the other day to make out whether I had won or lost in the course of the season. Does your lordship happen to recollect? I know you are very exact in your accounts.”

“Why, I rather think,” replied Lord Draxfort, “that upon the whole I had the best of it, somewhat about five guineas.”

“Capital that!” added the talisman; “that’s devilish generous of him to make aunty believe that I’m exact in my accounts. I do think he’s a good fellow, in spite of what they said of him at Melton after he was gone; for if he had any designs here, he wouldn’t try to make her think better of me.”

At the same time the inward voice, speaking for Mr. Alwyn, said, “That won’t have the effect upon her that he flatters himself with; I can see by her looks that she imagines I

spoke ironically; that's of no great consequence, though, for the moment. I wish I could make out her sentiments toward Lord Highfield. Positively I have discovered nothing this morning, though what I told her ought to have excited her, if anything could; and yet, what I observed yesterday—yes, that sudden and violent emotion came from the heart—I cannot be mistaken there. She must have got up her part for this morning—and yet why? Perhaps she had the report previously—can he have been with her? Egad! if she will but give him the use of her purse, it would save a confounded deal of trouble: yes, his lordship and her noodle of a nephew will make excellent blanks for the transfer of property. I must not forget to tell the blockhead what I said to her about his tenants and their farms. She cannot very well refuse him a loan; and if he should hesitate about asking her——”

Here the internal reporter stopped short, leaving her ladyship to guess at the sequel, which did not concern her personally.

At length the two friends took leave, and went away together, the one congratulating himself on having attained a familiar footing in the house, the other pronouncing it an intolerable bore to have to worship an old maiden aunt.

“Alas!” thought Lady Mary, “these are cruel truths which I learn so strangely! What avails it to know that I am the object of dislike and envy, or that my property is the subject of a ruined gambler’s speculations? And Lord Highfield—I know his secret, and therefore feel more intensely interested in all that concerns him. Yet what can I do to serve him? I am aware that he is threatened, but cannot discern in what manner with sufficient precision to enable me to warn him, if indeed it be not

already too late. And my nephew—I must ever henceforth think of him with pain, and view his conduct with suspicion. But for the knowledge of his secret thoughts, I might have imagined him to be a very different character, and felt happy in supposing myself respected. I should never have reproached him with his past neglect, knowing the innumerable calls and attractions of pleasure that await a young man of his rank and fortune; it was not natural for him to seek the society of a person of my age. Perhaps I am unjust towards him now; there is much to be said in his behalf. He was the eldest and favourite child both of his father and mother, and it must be confessed that she was always a very weak woman, and indulged him in every caprice: I hope he treats her kindly.”

Here her cogitations were interrupted by the sudden entrance of her French cook, a poor

fellow whom she had engaged, with the assistance of the talisman, from motives of compassion. He came now to complain of Rachel, who, according to his account, had stolen a piece of beef and divers kitchen utensils, and carried them off to her own apartment.

“ She want all my fire before,” he continued, “ but I tell her no, and den she save herself wid de rotsbeef what I want for my lady. I not love to make 'plaints, but it is a ting inconceivable whey dey steal de meat. I ask her what for, and all she say is, I not know how to make a Yockish bouden.”

“ I believe you must forgive her for this time, Louis,” said her ladyship, smiling ; “ you may calculate on having both the beef and the pudding ready at the hour of dinner.”

“ Ver well, miladi, ver well,” replied Louis, with a shrug, “ I wash my hands. If he is not ready, it shall not be my faut ; but I hope that shall not arrive often.”

The talisman added: "Ah, miladi! you spile dat littel old woman what not love me, and turn up de nose même at de turkey aux truffes. Why you not get pretty French maid, what will dress you better? It is a horror to see you sometime; it makes me pain to see you look so triste. Ah! une jolie jeune Française will soon change all dat. You are not old nor ugly; what for, den, you dress so vilaine? You must go to Paris."

"Don't alarm yourself, Louis," said Lady Mary; "it is not likely that anything of the kind will happen again. Be so good, when you go down stairs, as to tell Jenkins to let me have the chariot at the door as soon as possible."

"Certainement, miladi," replied Louis, and he bowed himself out of the room, while the talisman reported him to be perfectly contented with his mistress and his situation, and determined to keep it if possible.

This little incident turned the current of her ladyship's thoughts :—“ Yes,” said she, “ that poor fellow's altered condition is a proof that my gift is valuable, if rightly used. He was miserable and starving in a strange land, and now he is secured from want, and contented. And my coachman likewise: what might his fate have been but for me? It is melancholy to conjecture. I have saved them both from misery, perhaps from guilt, and maybe I shall be able — yes, I must — I must be in the presence of Lord Highfield: I may learn something of his difficulties. With the sentiments towards me which he indulges, it is impossible that he can refuse my assistance, if necessary.”

With such feelings Lady Mary entered her carriage, and called at every house where she thought there was a chance of meeting his lordship. All was in vain. She met him not; and what appeared more singular was, that she

heard not a word of his ruin. She therefore comforted herself by hoping that it was an invention of Mr. Alwyn's.

The only result of her round of morning calls was, that immediately she left any house the general remark was, "How *much* Lady Mary Deningford is altered!"

CHAPTER IX.

“MY dear aunt ! I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you !” exclaimed George Deningford, embracing her ladyship, as he was wont formerly, when a boy. “Why, you stare as if you didn’t know me. God bless your good-humoured face ! I’ve often thought of you since we parted, and should have found you out somehow, if I hadn’t met Rachel. But I came to town only the night before last, with my captain, and he would scarcely suffer me to go out of his sight till after the examination. Well, that’s over now, and I’m all ready to be

made a lieutenant : I don't know when, though. Well, never mind — take my chance. But, come, tell me how you 've been for these last six years, and all about yourself? Rachel says you 're very rich ; — so much the better, for I 'm very poor, and shall want to borrow some money of you, to pay for rigging me out here, till I 'm of age : that 'll be in two months, and then I 'll pay you again ; so don't begin to look blue about it, old lady. I shall have some prize-money to receive too, so you won't have to take me in tow long. But what 's the meaning of your living in this great house, and such a lot of servants? You got a prize in the lottery, I suppose, or how was it? Come, tell me, that 's a good soul."

Never since the possession of her talisman had Lady Mary been so delighted, for its words were perfectly in accordance with those spoken by her nephew, whose personal appearance

struck her with surprise and admiration. She had been fond of noticing him in earlier days, because she knew that he was neglected at home, and it was a pleasure to see him conduct himself towards her with a degree of ease and freedom which he never exhibited in the presence of his parents. But though she thus became partial to him, she never imagined him to be endowed with any very shining qualities, and when he left England there was nothing in his appearance to indicate that he would ever become the sort of person whom she now saw before her. A good figure and handsome countenance are said to be equivalent to a letter of recommendation, but, in addition, those of the young sailor appeared to her to resemble strongly a portrait of her late uncle, in the gallery at Draxfort. This likeness alone would have prepossessed her in his favour, even though they had not been previously acquainted, but

its influence, acting with the avowal of sincerity on the part of the talisman, composed a charm which was inexpressibly grateful and cheering, perhaps more so in consequence of the recent interview with Lord Draxfort and his friend.

Lady Mary informed her nephew of every particular that he desired to know, and listened with interest to his account of where he had been and in what actions engaged. When he spoke of the latter, it was with a rapid modesty that pleased her much, and during the progress of a conversation of two hours, she felt her heart gradually warm and open towards him, with a fulness of confidence which she had not experienced towards any one since the commencement of her days of prosperity.

“ I have a month's leave of absence certain,” said he, “ and as my captain knows when I shall be of age, I have no doubt that it will be

extended till then. I mean to take a run down to have a look at the old place, but shall wait till my brother goes back. He is at Melton now, I find, as I called early yesterday morning in Park Lane, where some friend of his, I suppose, is living; so I wrote last night to let him know I was here."

"Where are you living, George?" asked Lady Mary.

"At the Hungerford Coffee-house in the Strand," was the reply. "Your dashing hotels hereabouts won't do for poor middies; but I shall try to get a lodging in this neighbourhood now I have found you, for I know nobody else in town, and mean to make the most of you. By the by, now you're so rich, I shouldn't wonder if you could lend me a horse; do, if you can, for I want one *very* particularly."

"That is quite a sailor's whim," observed

her ladyship, smiling ; “ I can lend you a carriage ; will not that do as well ? ”

“ No, aunt,” replied the young seaman, “ that would be quite out of character—coachman, and all that—for I don’t think I should make any great hand of steering myself in this great place. But never mind, I can hire one, I dare say.”

“ No, no, don’t do anything of the kind,” said his aunt ; “ if you *must* have a horse, my coachman shall look out for one for you, but you had better be contented with a hackney-coach, if you cannot accept my offer of a chariot.”

“ But it is to go out of town with,” observed George, “ and there’s nothing like a horse for that, as one can make him fast to a post or a tree, or put him into a berth at a stable, and so be one’s own master, and stop as long as one pleases.

“It will hardly do to tell her where I want to go,” said the talisman, “and yet I’ve a great mind; I’m sure she would like Sarah and her mother too; but then, I’m afraid a rich acquaintance in their circumstances might be humiliating—heigho! If the old nabob had but left me some of his money, instead of giving it all to my aunt—Gently—avast there! Let us have no envy; she knows how to take care of it better than I do. But what a glorious thing it would have been!”

“I thought you told me just now,” observed her ladyship, “that you had no acquaintances here, but I suppose you mean to call upon *somebody*, when you talk of tying your horse to a post?”

“Ah, my dear aunt,” replied George, “I see by that arch look of yours that you’ve got something in your head; you women are so cunning and suspicious, there is no hiding

anything from you. I don't know any one in London, but there are two — passengers whom we brought home in our ship from Naples, who have taken lodgings at Hammersmith, and so, as I promised to call upon them if I could find time, I thought it would be a good opportunity of taking a ride, and mean to go to-morrow morning."

"Well, George," said Lady Mary, smiling, "you need not fear being at a loss for a conveyance, as there are stages at all hours; but I have a proposition to make to you, on which I must insist. You see that I have a large house here, much larger than is necessary for me, therefore you will oblige me by considering it as your home during your stay in town; come and go just as you please, as if you were in an hotel; and as for your friends, I am sure I shall be happy to make their acquaintance for your sake. I have that confidence in you, that

I feel certain you would not form any improper connexions : they are two young officers, like yourself, no doubt ?”

“ My dear aunt !” exclaimed George ; “ this is kind indeed ! I do not know how to thank you as I ought ; but I do love you dearly, and always did.” Here, as if forgetting that he was no longer a boy, he sprang forward, threw himself upon Lady Mary’s neck, and kissed her. “ Yes,” he continued, “ you were always like a second mother to me.”

“ More,” murmured the talisman ; “ my mother never treated me with the same kindness as my aunt did ; and she is not at all altered in consequence of her riches. No, I will have no secrets ; I will tell her all ; she shall know exactly how the land lies, and she will instruct me how to steer.”

“ Well, well, that is enough,” said her ladyship, gently pushing him from her. “ You

know—you may easily perceive that your being here cannot put me to the smallest inconvenience; so that point is settled; and if either or both of your young friends would like to spend a few days in town, we can find beds for them.”

“ You are too good, too good, my dear aunt,” murmured the grateful youth.

“ Would you like to have them here, George?” asked Lady Mary, as demurely as possible.

“ Would I !” exclaimed her nephew; “ why, that would be heaven upon earth ! In the same house !—but—no, no ; it can’t be. Look ye, aunt ; I won’t deceive you ; but the fact is, they are—they are—not two young gentlemen.”

“ Not *gentlemen* !” ejaculated her ladyship, affecting to misunderstand him. “ I hope, my dear boy, that you have been careful of not forming any improper acquaintance. But I

beg your pardon, perhaps they are a couple of good, honest jack tars, and in that case my kitchen is open to them. Yet, you said something about its being like heaven upon earth to be in the same house with them; I do not exactly understand that."

"It would be very odd if you did," replied the nephew. "No; they are no more like a brace of able-bodied seamen than a jib boom is like a stern lantern; if they had, they wouldn't have wanted our help when that tub of a felucca was yawning about off Cape Campanella, while her lubberly crew were all hands praying to the saints instead of working the pumps. No, my dear aunt, the person I allude to is a widow lady, who lost her husband in Sicily, and was making her way to Naples when we met with her. I happened to have the command of the boat that went to their assistance, and that is the way our acquaintance

began. Our ship was very soon after ordered home to refit, and she was glad to obtain a passage. She is, I think, somewhat older than you ; but I am sure, if you knew her, you would like her exceedingly."

"Very possibly," observed Lady Mary, carelessly. "But she is only *one* ; I understood you before that there were *two* persons."

"The other is her daughter," replied George, affecting to speak with the same *sang froid* as her ladyship, and somewhat annoyed by feeling a glowing tint in his cheeks, which made him apprehensive that he had not entirely succeeded.

"Who has nothing very particular about her, I suppose," observed his aunt ; "as otherwise you doubtless would not have forgotten to mention her."

Instead of making an immediate reply, the

young sailor started up, and began striding to and fro across the room, uttering a sort of half-whistle, while Lady Mary, who had not been very jocular of late, enjoyed his embarrassment somewhat more, perhaps, on that account.

“Egad, she’s got the weather-gage!” exclaimed the talisman—“what shall I say? Precious work I shall make of a description of such a masterpiece of Nature’s handywork!—no, ’tis impossible! Besides, if I could do it properly, she’d only laugh at me, and she’s pretty near ready to do so as it is; no—she carries too many guns for me. It’s all true, as the old forecastle song has it.” Here George took to humming a sort of tune, which the inward voice accompanied, by saying,

“ ‘ Britannia’s sons, d’ye see,
 They never strike afloat;
 But when they come ashore
 They strike to petticoat.
 Tol, tol,’ &c.

Yes, I must either strike, or cut and run. But why do that?—no, no, the old girl has got a good heart of her own, so here goes.” And the nephew threw himself again into his chair, and replied, “Look ye, my dear aunt, there are some kinds of persons whom one can’t very well describe; and that’s the case with Miss Wainfleet. You must see her to know anything about her; for there is something so inexpressibly—so indescribably fascinating—so different from other people, that, upon my soul, it is impossible not to——What was I going to say? There now, you are laughing—I see you don’t believe me; but if you had been with me yesterday morning——”

“Yesterday morning!” exclaimed Lady Mary; “then you have contrived to find your way to Hammersmith already without a horse.”

“Why yes, aunt,” replied George; “the

fact is, that when I called and found nobody in Park Lane, I thought I might as well go on and inquire how our passengers reached home, as it is a fortnight since we put them ashore at Portsmouth—remember that I didn't know you were in town."

"If you had, I do not suppose you would have acted otherwise," said his aunt; "so be frank and honest with me, my dear boy, and tell me all you know about these individuals to whom you appear to be so much attached: not now, as I perceive it wants but a few minutes of the dinner hour. We shall be alone afterwards; and then, if you are disposed to make me your confidential friend, as you were wont formerly, I think I may venture to promise that you shall have no cause to repent. No, no, do not attempt to make a speech; I can read your thoughts—you agree to the compact, that is sufficient; and henceforth plain, open sincerity is established between us."

In reply George articulated something which, though differently expressed, amounted to much the same as the words uttered by the talisman as her ladyship was leaving the room; and those were, “God bless the old girl! why she’s kinder than ever! with such hearts they must all three love one another.—I’m a lucky dog!”

Lady Mary’s toilet on that day was a very brief affair, and was rendered more so than it otherwise would have been, in consequence of Rachel’s anxiety about what might possibly occur to the Yorkshire pudding during her absence. According to the report of the talisman, her mistress had no idea of the nicety and care requisite in such an important case; and the old handmaiden’s mind was visited with tormenting apprehensions of coals jumping out of the fire, and of the beef falling from the vertical jack, to which, for want of a kitchen-range and spit in her own room, she

had been obliged to suspend it. Either of these accidents would be fatal to the savoury dish which she had, in the pride and gladness of her heart, prepared for "the dear boy;" and so poor Rachel was of very little service to her mistress, who therefore dismissed her as soon as possible to watch over the object of her care, which was eventually turned out of hand in a style perfectly satisfactory to all parties.

In the mean while Lady Mary, while alone, was annoyed by one of those impertinent and thankless ifs which are ever intruding upon poor mortals to prevent them from enjoying present good: it was suggested by certain "family" feelings. She was perfectly satisfied with her nephew, and believed herself grateful that she had discovered sincerity in so near a relation; but, while she acknowledged this, she could not help sighing, "*If* he had but been the eldest son!" Her thoughts then re-

curred to Lord Draxfort and the earlier part of the morning, and she decided that to constitute him her heir would be but to elevate him as a surer mark for the aim of designing villany. From this it may be inferred that she had already formed some indistinct plans for the future benefit of her young sailor.

The story that she heard after dinner in no degree lessened the warmth of her feelings towards him, although he concealed the most important circumstance, which was, that in rescuing the two females from their peril, he had risked his own life. "It would only make her uneasy if I told her that," said the talisman; "she would be fancying that one is always in danger."

It seemed that, after the ladies were received on board his Majesty's ship, young George Deningford found various opportunities of conversing with Miss Sarah Wainfleet, and her

mother felt not the smallest degree of alarm at their intimacy. Being the widow of a brave officer, she respected the brave, and Mr. Denningford had proved himself to be of their number; moreover, the debt of gratitude which they both owed to him entitled him to more than ordinary attention. So her mind was perfectly easy till she heard that he bore the epithet of "honourable" before his name, and then she became alarmed, and spoke to her daughter, and said many wise and true things, dictated by affection, experience, and observation, concerning unequal marriages; but they came too late, for Sarah had already made George a present of her heart, no doubt because she could not think of any better way of recompensing him for past services. However, she dutifully promised to be guided hereafter entirely by the counsel of her mother, and to do nothing without her consent; upon which

her mother kissed her, and sought an opportunity of speaking to the midshipman, who candidly confessed he was the son of a lord, but that what he expected on that account would not, he apprehended, "alter the trim of a yawl." He understood, he said, he was to have something when he came of age, but he had no idea of what sum, as his father had died since he left England, and his brother, who very seldom wrote to him, never mentioned such matters in his letters.

From that time the good mother satisfied herself by always making a third whenever the two young people entered into conversation, and nothing more was said in a serious way till their arrival at Portsmouth. George then contrived to obtain their address at the house of a friend at Hammersmith, where they proposed remaining till they could meet with a suitable residence. On his recent call, he had

been directed to snug lodgings which they had already taken, and where he read his welcome in the sparkling eyes of the daughter, and in a grateful pressure given by the hand of her mother.

It is not to be supposed that George was thus brief in giving the particulars of his amour to his aunt ; neither, when speaking of his mistress, did he exhibit that eloquence so common among the more practised and therefore less warm-hearted admirers of beauty. Sarah was his first love, the idol enshrined in the innermost sanctuary of his heart, to be worshipped in secret, with a sincerity and intenseness of respect and affection that rendered it impossible for him to make her the subject of commonplace conversation. Even on the present occasion, as her name passed his lips, they quivered ; but, to be sure, it was his first confession, and he could not help feeling that his

aunt might, if she thought proper, remove every obstacle to his happiness.

Lady Marý listened attentively both to what he said and to the report of the talisman, and found no reason to be dissatisfied with either, though the latter was sometimes flighty and hyperbolical. The first object that the lover had in view appeared to be to induce her to drive down to Hammersmith and call upon the ladies; but that, she felt, was quite out of the question till she could learn somewhat more about them; for George could not even tell her the mother's maiden name, nor to what regiment her husband had belonged.

“My dear boy,” she said, after having heard him to the end, “you have been somewhat rash in this affair; but instead of blaming you, since what is past cannot be recalled, I will hope all may prove agreeable to your wishes and belief. If so, I will be your friend; but

you must allow me to make inquiry ; I am well acquainted with several officers high in the service, and do not apprehend any difficulty. In the mean while it will be most prudent for you not to visit Hammersmith, as, if it should be necessary ——”

“ My dear aunt,” exclaimed the lover, interrupting her, “ that is impossible, as I promised to let them know when I had passed my examination, and should have run down this evening if I hadn’t learnt that you were in town.”

“ You can send a note ; that will be quite sufficient,” said his aunt.

“ Yes,” observed George, “ I might do that, certainly.”

“ Quite sufficient !” exclaimed the talismanic voice. “ I wonder if my aunt was ever in love ; she talks of writing a note as if it was to send an order to a tradesman. But there’s

some sense in what she says too about making inquiry ; it's all very natural in her, because she has not seen them. Well, well, let her inquire—I'm not afraid of that ; but to stay away from Hammersmith till she gets a report from a set of old invalids, hang me if I can promise that ! they'll perhaps take as much time about it as the Prize-court."

" Well, my dear George," said Lady Mary, " write your note this evening, and promise to breakfast with me to-morrow morning ; I exact nothing farther at present. Remember only that Rachel has got your room ready, and won't be satisfied unless you take possession of it to-night : cannot you contrive to do so ? It is now only ten o'clock ; you will have plenty of time to go to the Strand and arrange your affairs there and return here. At all events, you must excuse me for running away from you ; you know our compact is that there is to

be no ceremony between us, and I must show myself this evening at a party in the neighbourhood."

This abrupt termination of their interview was occasioned by the fear of delay expressed by the talisman. Her ladyship felt almost certain of meeting a general who was said, in common parlance, to know everybody in the army, and she hoped to gain from him some information respecting the late Major Wainfleet, and thus have it in her power to speak more decidedly to her nephew on the following morning at breakfast.

"Poor fellow!" thought she; "if he has placed his affections imprudently, I must endeavour to get him appointed on some foreign station; and yet it will grieve me to part with him."

On her arrival at a large mansion in Portland Square, she, after some difficulty, descried

the general seated, with two other veterans and a foreign nobleman, at a whist table, which was thrust into a corner of the room for their accommodation. They were surrounded, or rather hemmed in by beauty and gaiety. The rooms were crowded; all was brilliancy and elegance; a party of young people were dancing a quadrille within a few yards of them; yet there they sat, apparently unconscious, and each determined to withhold his attention from all that was passing, and to fix it on the game, the silent science, which, oddly enough, many of its votaries love to practise most in the midst of noise and confusion. Here was a trial of patience for Lady Mary. A man would probably have postponed the inquiry till another opportunity; but, as the Grand Sultan (after making light of the threats of various kings) said, on hearing that the Empress Catherine intended to make war against him, "That

is different, when a woman takes a thing in hand it is time for us to put our trust in Allah and the Prophet:" so her ladyship seated herself beside the general, at first simply for the purpose of cutting off his retreat; but she had not sate long ere it struck her, that as there were two other military men present, the introduction of Major Wainfleet's name could not be better timed than between the deals.

"Wainfleet! Wainfleet!" muttered the general, "yes, I know the name. What regiment, my lady?"

"Really I cannot inform you," was the reply.

"That's unlucky," said the veteran, "because — clubs trumps; — you see, my lady, in the army—it's your lead, Baron — all depends upon that. I knew a lieutenant of the name in the —— many years ago; most likely it is the same—our first trick."

“ Mind your cards, general,” said Lady Mary; “ you can tell me what you know of him afterwards ; I am in no hurry.”

“ Exactly so,” observed the veteran, “ and in the mean while I ’ll endeavour to recollect. I ’m sure I know something particular about him.”

The talisman here informed her ladyship that the foreigner did not like to see ladies sitting in such a position as to overlook the cards.

“ All the better,” was her mental reply ; “ I shall therefore remain where I am, to induce him to leave off playing somewhat sooner.”

When the cards were out, the general, after taking a huge pinch of snuff, turned towards her, and in a low voice said—

“ I don’t know *why* you ask me about that person, my lady, but he is not one of us. No, no, you must not have anything to say to him ;

that is, unless he is very greatly altered, and I do not think that likely, as he married—I wish they would have done with that squeaking violin! I cannot conceive why people come into society to dance! Such a noise and confusion! It's impossible to hear oneself speak! It puts a stop to all conversation—There's my card—I never keep anybody waiting. But you are quick in sorting your cards, Sir Thomas."

"Rather," drawled his adversary.

Here the baron let one of his cards fall under the table, and as he stooped to recover it the talisman, speaking for him, said—

"Let us see where miladi's feet are."

Her ladyship could not avoid smiling, for, as he was the general's partner, the only person with whom she could have held any pedal communication to his injury was a prodigiously heavy, fierce-looking colonel of heavy dra-

goons, in whose gruff tones the talisman almost immediately growled—

“What does the woman mean by intruding upon us in this way? I suppose she thinks her money entitles her to commit any impertinence. If she wasn't the general's friend, I'd soon send her about her business. Zounds! can't one have a single rubber in peace and quietness without being plagued with the women?”

“I would begin to talk to him immediately,” thought Lady Mary, “but poor George! I've no heart for raillery now. This marriage! what *can* the general allude to?”

There was no alternative, so she patiently sate out the rubber, and then, to her dismay, there was a talk of a second, with a change of partners; but the talisman informed her that the heavy dragoon did not choose to run the risk of being associated with the general till she

should decamp ; therefore she kept her ground firmly, and was soon relieved by the appearance of a lively, high-spirited young lady, who, rushing forward as though upon an affair of the utmost importance, seized upon the foreigner, and exclaimed—

“ Mon cher baron ! I ’m delighted to see that you have done with those odious cards ! You must come with me directly, to settle a dispute about whether *monsieur* should be pronounced *mooshoo* or *moonshoo*. Nothing less than your authority will suffice. So, allons ! donnez moy la braw. That is properly pronounced, isn’t it ? ”

“ Parfaitement, pour une Anglaise, admirable ! ” said the baron, suppressing a smile while rising and proffering his arm, by which he was instantly seized and carried off in triumph.

Here the thoughts of the heavy colonel, as reported to her ladyship, were excessively dis-

respectful to the ladies in general, and to herself and the dashing deportress of the baron in particular. But the general was now at liberty, and therefore she felt no disposition to attend to any other person's thoughts or words. In reply to her inquiry he again commenced :—

“ Not being acquainted with your ladyship's reasons for asking after such a person, I hardly know what to say.”

“ As he is now no more,” said Lady Mary, it is not so much concerning him that I wish for information (though I shall be glad to obtain any you can furnish me with) as concerning his widow ; I am very anxious to know something of her past character and conduct.”

“ Ah ! I see,” said the talisman, “ her ladyship is disposed to be charitable to the widow of an officer. Well, I must be charitable too. It won't do to tell her of things that happened nearly twenty years ago : why should I ? Time

changes us all, and perhaps — But I must be candid with her to a *certain* extent, for I have too much respect for her to allow her to commit herself by anything like intimacy with one who has been in such a degraded situation.”

“ I cannot speak very decidedly to that point, my lady,” replied the general. “ As for the poor fellow himself, he was one of those who are said to be no man’s enemy but their own ; and certainly he did contrive to injure himself in every possible way and shape. Has your ladyship seen the widow ?”

“ No,” was the faint reply.

“ It is quite as well not,” resumed the veteran ; “ she was reckoned a fine, dashing woman, but — I dare say she is much changed. They said, she lived very unhappily with her husband, and, indeed, it would have been surprising had it been otherwise, for the poor fellow was, no doubt, forced into the match by

the consequences resulting from his previous misconduct. They had one child though, a daughter, if I recollect right. Poor things! they must be badly off, I fear, for he was very unlikely to make any provision for their support. I should therefore judge, that your ladyship's *bounty* could not be bestowed anywhere where it would be more acceptable."

The talismanic voice added :—

" I suppose the unfortunate creature has run the usual downward course, and, hearing of your large fortune, has humbled herself to become a petitioner."

Lady Mary had heard more than enough to alarm her seriously on her nephew's account, and she sate for some minutes entirely absorbed by her own feelings and unconscious of all around. The kind-hearted general was astonished at the effect of his communication, and said something of the probability that time

might have wrought a change in the characters of the parties, and promised to make inquiry ; but her ladyship shook her head, and begged that he would not give himself the trouble.

Here the talisman, speaking for the heavy colonel, who had not stirred from his chair, said, “ She seems to have got a poser for her pains in coming here to break up our table. I’m heartily glad of it ; it serves her perfectly right.”

As Lady Mary passed through the brilliant saloons to her carriage, a murmuring, as of a multitude within, told her that her altered manners and appearance rendered her the object of general astonishment.

CHAPTER X.

A WEEK had elapsed, and the young midshipman was constant in his visits to Hammer-smith, though he still remained under Lady Mary's roof. Each morning at breakfast the subject of his misplaced affection was renewed; but all the aunt's rhetoric was unavailing. "Do but see them *once*," said he, "and you will be undeceived."

The talisman added, "I wish she would speak out, and say *exactly* what she has heard, and who told her; then one might sift the matter to the bottom: but I expect it is no-

thing more than our family pride. She need not know how often I visit them; but I will not be such a hypocrite as to pretend that I will give up the acquaintance."

"It was my intention, George," said Lady Mary, "to have introduced you to a gentleman from whom you may learn some particulars of the late major and his lady; but unfortunately he has been out of town for the last week—he is expected to return daily. Let me prevail upon you not to repeat your visits to Hammer-smith till you have seen him. Surely that is not too great a sacrifice for *me* to ask! If you knew how *deeply* I feel interested in your welfare, you would not refuse me so *trifling* a request."

"Do not talk so, aunt," said the young seaman; "you know how highly I appreciate your kindness. But really, to abandon one's friends—to break with those whom one esteems,

merely because some gossiping person has misrepresented them to you, appears to me absolutely base and cowardly. Besides, they know that you are prejudiced against them, for we have no secrets; and if I were to change my conduct, they would suppose it was to curry favour with you, on account of your fortune, and that suspicion I could not endure."

"No," said the talisman, "not for all you possess would I risk the loss of their esteem."

After a few more vain endeavours to carry her point, Lady Mary succeeded in exacting from him a promise that matters should go no farther between him and Miss Wainfleet without her being apprised of it beforehand.

"Do not suppose, my dear aunt," added he, "that there is any great merit in my making you this promise, for I *must* wait till I am of age, if not somewhat longer, as Draxfort says there is some hitch in the lawyers' proceedings,

and so he can't tell exactly when my five thousand pounds will be forthcoming. I told Mrs. Wainfleet that that was all I had or ever expected, and I do think she likes me the better since she knows I'm not rich. I do wish you knew her, aunt ; I'm sure you would love one another, and we should all be so happy !”

“ Had I not been able to discern the general's thoughts,” said Lady Mary to herself, “ I might have supposed her guilty of poverty alone, a great crime in the eyes of the world, though none in mine, and so, in all probability, I should have fallen into the snare as well as this dear boy ; but I will endeavour to save him, though the means be painful to us both.”

After the incorrigible young lover had gone his way, she sate down, and was ruminating on what step it would be most prudent first to take, when the chimes of a small clock reminded her of another and more pressing duty which she had resolved to perform.

For some few previous days the reports respecting Lord Highfield were so general, that it became impossible not to believe his affairs to be in a state of dreadful embarrassment. Lady Mary took the magnanimous resolution of relieving him from it, and, having fixed upon Mr. Merington as the most proper agent in so delicate an affair, had summoned the old gentleman to wait upon her on that day at twelve o'clock. She was not aware it was so late, but it now wanted only a quarter to that hour, and that quarter passed rapidly away. Poor George and his affairs were entirely lost sight of; she was about to pay what seemed a debt of affection—to awaken joy and gladness in the melancholy, lacerated heart of him whose secret thoughts and regrets had been so strangely revealed to her. The anticipation was delightful; and she indulged herself in imagining his feelings of gratitude and the pleasure he must experience, feeling towards

her as he did, at discovering that she took so deep an interest in his welfare.

Her venerable agent was punctual to the hour, and listened, with no small degree of surprise and embarrassment, to the extraordinary commission, while the talisman, speaking for him, expressed a wish that he had been able to obtain mortgages to tie up *the whole* of his client's property.

“Your ladyship will pardon me, I hope,” said the old gentleman, “if I speak my thoughts too freely. I know that Lord Highfield is an old acquaintance of your family; I remember him as a boy when I used to visit at Draxfort with my late respected friend your uncle: but times are changed since then. His lordship married the daughter of a rich banker in the city, and in consequence of that connexion, I am acquainted with many particulars concerning his affairs, which, I am

sorry to say, are of an unpleasant nature. Of course I must obey your ladyship's commands; but, if I might advise ——”

“ Why, as for that,” observed Lady Mary, affecting gaiety, “ my dear sir, this is not exactly a matter of business; if it were, perhaps one might obtain better security. It is rather an affair of honour and secresy between old friends, or, more properly, a cancelling of former obligations; for I have heard that the late Lord Highfield befriended my father and brother on more than one occasion; so you will observe, my dear sir, there can be no question of bonds or securities between us. If his lordship can but be induced to take the money, that is all I wish; he will be at liberty to return it to me when it best suits his convenience.”

“ Return it to her when it suits his convenience !” exclaimed the talisman; “ poor good

lady ! she judges of others by herself ! What obligations *can* her father and brother have incurred to induce her to take this rash step ? An affair of honour and secresy indeed ! Ah, my lady ! a gamester's honour is not the sort of security in which your uncle would have liked to see his property invested."

While such thoughts were passing in his mind Mr. Merington strove to moderate her ladyship's generosity, and persuade her to confine her offer to a small amount ; but all was in vain ; she resolutely persisted in relieving Lord Highfield from his difficulties, even if it were necessary to advance the half of her fortune for the purpose ; and at length the good old gentleman went away with a heavy heart, to fulfil his extraordinary mission.

When he was gone, Lady Mary was troubled with a thousand fears and fancies. Sometimes she thought it would have been better, and

more delicate, if she had tendered her assistance through the medium of a third person, keeping herself entirely out of sight. Then she trembled lest her offer should arrive too late, or be refused. Perhaps, likewise, his lordship's affairs might not be in the state reported, and he might take umbrage at her interference ; and even if he were in difficulties he might imagine them to be unknown to the world, and so she would have inflicted pain instead of affording relief.

While her mind was in this state of confusion she was surprised by a visit from her friend Lady Derwent, whom she had not seen since the change in her fortune, and whom she had often longed to subject to the ordeal of the talisman. The meeting was, apparently, affectionate on both sides, but scarcely had her visiter taken a seat ere the secret voice murmured—

“It is as I thought it would be! she is dreadfully altered! She is not fit to be the mistress of a large fortune; what a pity that it is so thrown away! She was happy and contented with her slender income, and now she is the picture of care and anxiety.”

Lady Derwent in the mean while informed her dear friend that she had left Edinburgh at a few hours' notice, to accompany Sir William her husband to London, where he had been called on some military business.

“We arrived last night,” she continued, “and this of course is my first call, so I know nothing of what is going forward, and shall look to you for all sorts of information. It is four years since I was last in town, and I suppose everything is changed. What a wonderful alteration a few years makes in some people! I declare I was quite shocked yesterday at St. Albans, where we met Lord Highfield, posting

away to his place, somewhere in the north. He looks like a person of seventy at least, and has such a wild, staring way with him, that I hardly knew him. But what's the matter with you, my dear? — how pale you are !”

“ Nothing, nothing,” replied Lady Mary ; “ that is — nothing of any importance. But I have not been very well this morning ; a trifling headache, that's all —”

“ I'm afraid you have been raking — living a little too gaily,” said Lady Derwent.

“ It was at the mention of Lord Highfield's name,” murmured the talisman ; “ I thought she had long since forgotten the *penchant* which, I have often felt convinced, she once entertained towards him. But riches — riches ! When all our desires are gratified save one, that one becomes intolerable : *surely* there can be nothing wrong between them ! No, no, that cannot be ! — and yet, why then this strange

emotion? We used to speak of him formerly, and I never perceived anything of the kind."

Lady Mary felt so indignant at this unworthy suspicion that she was unable to continue the conversation with the frankness and friendly ease with which it had commenced, and the talisman soon informed her that the change in her manner was noticed, and had made a deep, and not favourable impression on the mind of her visiter.

Time thus flew not away so rapidly as it is wont when two friends meet after a long separation; and when they parted, notwithstanding mutual expressions of attachment, each felt that the other was changed.

"I am sorry that I cannot accompany you this morning," said Lady Mary, "but I have some very urgent business in hand, and expect my agent here every moment."

"Pray make no apology, my dear," replied

Lady Derwent ; “ you will call upon us when you are at leisure ; Sir William will be delighted to see you.”

The talisman simultaneously observed —

“ There was a time when she would have told me the nature of her ‘ very urgent business,’ and been glad to ask my advice.”

“ I fear,” thought Lady Mary when alone, “ I very much fear, that my friend has not moved in the most select society latterly, or such an idea could never have entered into her imagination. But it is well that my extraordinary gift has warned me of it ; I shall be on my guard in future. Lord Highfield gone into the country ! — looking old — harassed, — perhaps at this moment giving way to despair ? Why did I procrastinate ? — Yes — I must — there is no other way — I will write to him.”

As she was forming this resolution Mr. Merington came to announce his lordship’s ab-

sence, and was somewhat pleased, as well as surprised, at the coolness with which her ladyship received the intelligence.

“ She has had time to think of what I said,” observed the talisman; “ I hope she has altered her mind, for the present at least, and I ’ll take care to lock up her money, so that she can touch nothing but the interest in future, without giving six months’ notice ; that ’s the only way of securing her from the consequences of her romantic generosity.”

The worthy lawyer’s reflections were here interrupted, in a very unpleasant and startling manner, by his client, who said, “ We can do nothing more in this affair at present ; but you will please to let me have twenty thousand pounds, in bank notes, to-morrow.”

“ My lady !” exclaimed Mr. Merington.

“ What *can* she mean ? what can she want with such a sum ? what will she do with it ?”

cried the talisman. "Surely *she* hasn't lost so much at cards!"

"I *must* have it," Lady Mary said, faintly smiling at the old gentleman's astonishment; "when I part with it, you shall know where it is gone."

"It will be impossible to let you have it to-morrow," observed Mr. Merington, "as it is a holiday at the Bank."

"That will give her time to think," said the talisman.

"Well," replied Lady Mary, "let it be the next day, then; but do not disappoint me, on any account."

"Had I not better pay it into your ladyship's bankers'?" asked the old gentleman; "you can draw checks then for whatever sums you may happen to want, and it will be much safer."

"No," she replied, "I must have it by me in bank notes; I have a particular reason."

As there was no arguing against a mistress of property entirely at her own disposal, Mr. Merington was obliged to submit; but the talisman protested vehemently against such extraordinary drafts, and added, "Nine more whims like this, and she must return to her lodgings and her pension. She *must* think sometimes—it is impossible to suppose her deficient in intellect; and yet I cannot understand her character."

"It would be strange if he could," thought Lady Mary, as he left the room; "I am a subject of astonishment to myself. What a wondrous change this fortune and the possession of this talisman have wrought in my pursuits, my duties, and my character! But a few months since, and I was—no, I was not selfish, but my thoughts, my wishes, my prospects were bounded. I wished well to all; but I felt that my wishes were all that I could give them. The secrets of others troubled me

not, and I was happy—yes, those were happier days than I have since known. O that I had not accepted this mysterious power! But the die is cast: it has revealed to me things which I could never otherwise have known; it has opened to my view unthought-of duties. I will not shrink—they shall be performed: that generous, unsuspecting youth shall be snatched from the snares of a designing woman,—and, yes—the letter! I must write that first.”

The task of writing a note to Lord Highfield was not quite so easy as her ladyship fancied when she sat down to her escrutoire. The first she penned appeared too formal; the second too familiar, considering the length of time since their intimacy had ceased; and for other reasons she threw aside several more, after penning a few lines. At length she completed one, which she resolved to send, not

because she was satisfied with it, but because that, without mentioning his embarrassments, it appeared to her sufficiently explicit not to be misunderstood. It ran thus:—

“ MY DEAR LORD,

“ Why did you not keep your promise, and call upon me before you left town? if you had, much needless anxiety would have been avoided for *both* of us. I wished *very* much to have seen you, and now beg of you, on your return, to call upon me the *very first thing* after your arrival. Do not, *on any account*, disappoint me, and in the mean while continue to believe me

“ Yours very sincerely,

“ M. DENINGFORD.

“ P. S. I hope you have not, like many others, taken it into your head that I am changed. No; I may appear so to the world,

and perhaps really may be so to some; but *our* friendship is not one of yesterday. I add no more than that I shall *rely* upon your calling, and then whatever mystery may appear in this will be cleared up by a few minutes' conversation, which is better than all the letter-writing in the world. So fail not, *at your peril*, and—Adieu!”

An hour after this important epistle was despatched, her ladyship was closeted with an old admiral high in office, to whom she related her uneasiness on her nephew's account.

“ Ah!” said the veteran, “ boys will be boys, my lady, and there are always some of your sex ready to bring up a young fellow of family and fortune. Had like to have been hooked in myself many years ago; thought it confoundedly hard to be ordered off, I re-

member. Soon got the better of it, though: nothing like duty. He's a promising young fellow, I understand. Had some talk with his captain yesterday about him—never forget old acquaintance, Lady Mary. But where's the dowager? she ought to exert her authority."

"We understood that she was in Edinburgh," replied her ladyship, "and he wrote to her on his arrival; but I am told now that she is visiting somewhere in the north of Scotland. At all events, she has not replied to his letter, and I cannot learn her address; and in the mean while this affair is becoming serious."

"Ay, ay," observed the admiral, "daily visits—nothing else to do; I understand it all. Fall in love with my granny under such circumstances, if there was nobody else, a young rogue! Well, well, my lady, it is very kind of you to interest yourself about him; he'll thank you for it by and by."

“ I do feel intensely interested in his welfare,” said Lady Mary ; “ I would do anything, or make any sacrifice, to advance his prospects. Indeed it will be no small sacrifice that I make in parting from him, for I love him—yes, as though he were my own son ; he is so good, so open-hearted ! there is not a particle of guile in his composition.”

“ Great thing to say that, my lady,” observed the veteran.

“ Suppose she means to make him her heir,” said the talisman. “ Hope she hasn’t told him so ; young fellows never do so well as when they think they ’ve nothing to look to but their profession.”

“ Well, well,” continued the admiral, “ he’s past his examination ; seen some service in the Mediterranean—had a taste of the boat service there, I find. That will make something of ’em, if anything will—keep ’em awake ; better than yawning about on the quarter-deck.

Showed himself a Briton on two or three occasions, I hear; don't think you'll need to be ashamed of him some day. See what we can do for him, my lady; must contrive to get him out of the way of these land-sharks somehow."

Lady Mary, in returning thanks, expressed a wish that her interference might be concealed, as, though she felt perfectly justified in the step she had taken, she could not bear the idea of being exposed to poor George's probable reproaches.

"Make your mind easy on that head," said the admiral; "he wears a blue jacket, and belongs to his Majesty. A pretty thing it would be if officers were to require to know why and wherefore they are chosen on any particular service!"

"No, no," added the talisman, "you ladies must always possess a certain degree of influence as long as men are men, no matter whether

it be in the cockpit or at the board; but we don't hoist the petticoat at the fore, neither—that would never do!”

The consequences of this interview appeared much sooner than her ladyship had anticipated, for at dinner George received a note requiring his attendance at the Admiralty on the following morning at ten o'clock.

“What can they want with me?” exclaimed the unsuspecting youth; “surely they are not going to make me lieutenant already! no, that would be hardly fair, considering the number of poor fellows there are upon the list. And yet I don't know, for my captain said he had spoken for me to one of the lords, who was acquainted with our family, and it is not every one that thinks so lightly of the title of Honourable as—I know who.

His aunt, with considerable difficulty and evident emotion, expressed a wish that, what-

ever the business might be, it might be favourable to his interests.

“God bless the old girl!” exclaimed the talisman, “I know she wishes me well. I only wish she was not so confoundedly obstinate about not going to Hammersmith; but never mind, they’ll meet some day, and then all will be right.”

“As for that, my dear aunt,” replied George, “a summons to the Admiralty is always an advantage, provided a fellow has done nothing to merit censure. On second thoughts, I dare say it is only to spin a long yarn about the boat-service with some of the old laced jackets. My captain told me that they asked him more questions than he could answer on the subject; and for my part, I’d a tolerably fair allowance of that duty—we were sometimes in action three or four days in the week.”

Lady Mary trembled at the idea that she

had perhaps doomed him to be again employed in so perilous a service; but used every endeavour to conceal her emotion and support a conversation. At length, finding her efforts vain, she pleaded indisposition, and retired early to her room, but not to rest.

“ I cannot endure to take leave of him, poor fellow,” thought she; “ and yet, if I go from home, Lord Highfield may return.”

After some reflection, she decided on a plan which seemed likely to answer every purpose, and desired Rachel to inform her nephew that she was under the necessity of going into the country on the morrow, and probably should not return till the following day.

Matters being thus arranged, she sought repose; but sleep long fled from her eyelids. Her spirit was depressed with a presentiment of coming evil, which she endeavoured vainly to banish by the thought that she had per-

formed her duty; and when exhausted nature gave way to slumber, strange and fearful dreams haunted her imagination, and horrid phantoms, which seemed to be mysteriously connected with the talisman, pursued her till she awoke. Never had the dawn been more welcome than after that wretched night. "I would not—I could not endure such another!" she exclaimed. But she was mistaken; that was but as a passing, feathery cloud when compared with the utter gloom of many which were to follow.

George had breakfasted in his own room, and was gone to the Admiralty, when her ladyship entered her carriage, and desired to be driven to Mr. Merington's office in the city. There a considerable delay took place. The good man represented the impossibility of realizing from the funds on a holiday; but Lady Mary insisted, with a feverish impatience quite

at variance with what he had previously supposed to be her character; and at length he proposed to apply to her bankers, who had nearly half the requisite amount in their hands.

To the bankers accordingly they went, and the state of her ladyship's affairs caused her strange request to be immediately complied with; but thus the transaction which she had wished to keep secret became known to many. The avidity with which she seized the notes was like that of a miser, and excited the surprise of all present. Many things were uttered by the talismanic voice, which she heeded not, but, proceeding directly to her carriage, ordered the coachman to drive home. This was for the purpose of preventing her nephew from tracing her through the medium of Mr. Merington, for, when she judged herself to be beyond his observation, she pulled the check-string, and changed her course for Barnet,

where she desired to be conveyed in as short a time as possible.

On her arrival there, she left her coachman and horses, and posted to St. Alban's, where she alighted at the Sun, mentioned by Lady Derwent. There she decided, to the astonishment of the only servant she had brought with her, on remaining for the night.

"Just as you please, my lady," said he; "but, if you will allow me to speak, you will find yourself much more comfortable at the next stage; that is, if your ladyship is going farther on, or there's time enough to reach Woburn."

"It is very odd that she should be so close about where she's going," said the talisman, "and not even bring her own maid with her; one would think she was going to run away."

"No, John," replied her ladyship, "I shall remain here. I have heard a good account of

the house from some friends of mine, who stopped here the other day."

"This is one of the inconveniences of riches," thought she: "the other day I might have travelled in a stage coach, or as I pleased, and no one would have concerned himself about my route or my motives."

It then first occurred to her ladyship that there was a certain degree of awkwardness in inquiring, alone as she was, for Lord Highfield; but a moment's reflection on the importance of her business with him, and, more than all, the feeling of self-approbation, soon caused her to dismiss every scruple. The landlady, in reply to her questions, informed her that his lordship always changed horses there, and that when he went through last he said he should be back in a day or two. Lady Mary then requested, that if he arrived while she was in the house he should be informed that she wished to speak with him, and added:—

“No matter at what hour, let me have notice immediately.”

Having given this order, she endeavoured to compose her ruffled spirits, and to calculate calmly on the probability of seeing his lordship.

“He will have received my letter some hours since,” she thought: “if he has interpreted it aright, and means to avail himself of my assistance, he will return to town immediately.”

She then referred to a book of roads, and endeavoured to beguile the time by calculating how long it would take to perform the different stages, but ever and anon the recollection of poor George burst upon her, and when she thought of what he was at that moment suffering, and would have hereafter to endure, she more than once shed tears: the only relief she experienced was in the firm conviction that she had performed, and was still performing her duty.

At the hour of retiring to rest, on missing the services of Rachel, her ladyship endeavoured to picture to herself what might be passing in Cavendish Square.

“ Yes,” said she, “ the faithful creature will leave nothing undone that can contribute to the poor fellow’s comfort. His wardrobe is complete, and he has ample means to make any purchases that may be necessary. At this moment, perhaps, she is occupied in preparing for his departure. Yes, I did well to leave her ; it will be a satisfaction to me hereafter ; and she will tell me how he bore his disappointment, and whether he suspected me to be concerned in his abrupt removal, for he is too open-hearted to conceal anything. How happy might we have been had he placed his affections worthily ! I must ever be grateful for the talisman, were it only for revealing to me the sterling value of his character. Yes, the

gift is valuable, and must be for good, if used with prudence and purity of intention ; and surely my motives will endure the strictest investigation. Yet, those horrid dreams of last night ! that strange foreboding of ill, which is, even now, again gathering over my spirit ! Whence come they ? Can I, by making use of this secret, mysterious power, be acting under the influence of evil genii ? No, no ; this is mere nervous weakness. Let me arouse myself."

In the dead of night, when all else was silent, the people of the house frequently heard Lady Mary walking to and fro in her chamber.

What she had represented to herself of Rachel's occupation was nearly the truth, as her nephew had received instructions to repair to Portsmouth, to join a vessel which was then lying at Spithead. After the official communication had been made to him, the old admiral

before mentioned took an opportunity of speaking to him in private.

“ I knew your grandfather, my good fellow,” said he, “ and his brother George, your namesake, was an intimate friend of mine when we were about your age. He was a fine, noble-hearted fellow : pity that he hadn’t been brought up for the sea. Well, well, I sha’n’t forget you for his sake. Glad to find you likely to keep up the credit of the name. If it lies in my way to serve you, I will ; remember that. One word’s as good as a hundred. Write to me as a friend ; only mind, and let us have no skulking, or I ’m off the bargain ; and harkye, my lad, you may take that dirk abroad with you, but between you and me, I don’t think your money will be thrown away if you were to buy a sword and *et cæteras*. So there, there’s my hand ! God bless you !—sha’n’t keep you any longer. Dare say you’ve got some odd

things to stow away. Be on board at sunset to-morrow, remember."

Had George never beheld Sarah Wainfleet, that would have been a glorious day, but even the assurance of promotion could avail little in allaying the bitterness of parting; that was a scene which must be left to the reader's imagination. But while it was in progress, another was being enacted, of a pathetico-ludicrous description, in Cavendish Square, where the lover had hastily called to order his apparel to be packed up, and then immediately departed for Hammersmith, not, however, forgetting to call on the way, and give orders that the lieutenant's sword and *et cæteras* should be sent home that night.

Poor Rachel toiled, and scolded, and cried by turns; wished her mistress at home at one moment, and was glad she was absent the next; insisted on making a batch of plum cakes, such

as her young master used to like when he was a boy — quarreled with the French cook for interfering ; then with the baker for burning some odd half dozen — and, in short, appeared scarcely to know what she did.

George returned home late, was engaged during the greater part of the night in making his arrangements and writing a letter of thanks and farewell to his aunt, and started at five o'clock in the morning, when Rachel, in spite of his being grown up to man's estate, threw herself upon his neck and kissed him, and when he was gone sat down and cried like a child.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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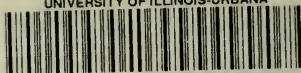
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